

Shedding Light on Domestic Violence

Can you imagine how persons feel when wounded - physically, verbally, or emotionally - by those they should be able to depend on for love, care, and protection? A statement posted on the United Methodist General Board of Church and Society website reports, "One in three women will experience some level of violence in their lives - half of them from intimate partners....According to the latest report from UNICEF, nearly 275,000,000 children worldwide are witnessing abuse in their everyday life...." Tragically, the church sometimes encourages persons to stay in abusive relationships, instead of offering resources and alternatives that could help break the cycle of violence. The GBCS statement, encouraging pastors and church leaders to preach and teach about domestic violence, provides links to helpful resources. Visit www.gbcs.org, select "Jump Start a Topic," "Domestic Violence," and "Resource Tools" for downloadable brochures on partner, child, and elder abuse and adolescent bullying, as well as study materials, including the *I Believe You* DVD and study guide, *Breaking the Silence*, and more. A list of other relevant resources follows this article.

The church, through its teaching and preaching, can indeed raise awareness of domestic violence, equip persons to recognize and protect against it, and refer persons to effective counselors and programs for prevention and intervention. It may also be helpful to provide a theological understanding of covenant and to educate our congregations and communities about issues and attitudes that fuel and sanction abusive behavior. Some domestic violence prevention and intervention programs attempt to change attitudes and behaviors by shaming the abusers. This approach may seem to work in some cases, but fails to address the underlying anger, inability to communicate, sense of powerlessness, and low self-esteem that can lead to verbal, emotional, and physical abuse.

Churches can teach about covenantal relationships, founded on mutual love and care, through sermons, pre-marital counseling, marriage education and enrichment, and relationship education for children, youth, and young adults. In covenant, persons agree to nurture and protect each other and to be held accountable for their words and actions. When one or both partners violate the covenant, reconciliation depends on the willingness of both persons to own their contributions to the relationship breakdown and to do what is necessary to renew their covenant. Violence and abuse break the covenant and should never be tolerated. If unchecked, violence and abuse will likely escalate over time and can ultimately destroy persons and families.

Beliefs about gender may feed domestic violence. Boys exposed to male role models of dominance and control will likely grow up exhibiting such attitudes and behaviors themselves. Women who have not learned to speak up for themselves assertively may resort to aggression to meet their needs. The church can encourage mutual respect and empowerment by emphasizing the first story of creation (Genesis 1:27: "So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them"), instead of the Adam's rib version in Genesis 2:4-25. We can respond to those who take verses from Ephesians 5 out of context to justify male dominance, by focusing on Ephesians 5:21: "Be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ." Churches can challenge tendencies toward gender role stereotyping in leadership assignments by inviting women to serve as trustees and men to teach church school. Consistent use of non-sexist language may help establish an expectation of equal rights and equal responsibility that might carry over into homes. We can address gender role stereotyping and chauvinistic attitudes in church school classes, youth programs, marriage preparation counseling, ongoing marriage education classes, and support groups.

Preaching and teaching can also illuminate the function of anger. Psalm 4:4 admonishes, "Don't sin by letting anger control you" (New Living Translation), indicating that anger itself is not a problem, but that the way it is expressed in words and actions can cause great harm. Anger, which alerts us that something needs attention, is usually a secondary emotion, masking guilt, fear, or feelings of inadequacy. Children, youth, and adults can be taught to recognize anger arising in themselves or

others and to seek understanding of the underlying feelings and needs, rather than reacting by lashing out. In addition to sermons on this subject, the church can offer classes and small group studies that focus on self-awareness, communication, and conflict management. Such experiences help persons learn how to resist being provoked by anger into acting against their own values, which deeply diminishes self-esteem and often creates a vicious cycle of increasing shame and escalating abuse.

Youth and others who are dating benefit from learning how to assess the character and potential compatibility of their dating partners and to date long enough and in a variety of settings in order to get a true picture of someone's attitudes and behavior before making a commitment. Those already married benefit from healthy relationship programs. See the following resource list and the document "Marriage and Family Ministry Resources Recommended by United Methodists" (www.gbod.org/marriage) for study books and DVD-based curriculum kits that can be taught by local persons who have some group leadership training and experience. Seminars and programs that require trained and certified leaders list upcoming events on their websites along with information about how to bring leaders to your community. Churches, alone or in cooperation with other churches and organizations, can sponsor and/or provide scholarship and childcare assistance for these opportunities, which are well worth the investment of time and money.

The church can also provide support for persons in stressful situations: new parents, parents of teens, caregivers, and those facing other challenging situations. Practical supports such as food pantries and thrift shops, when administered with compassionate, non-judgmental acceptance, protect the dignity and self-esteem of their clients. Classes and support groups for parents of children at different ages and stages, for caregivers, and for those who are unemployed and/or in recovery from addictions can help individuals and families cope successfully with these challenges, instead of falling apart. Smaller churches can join with other congregations to provide these ministries for a community or reasonable geographic area. Churches can also advocate for fair wages, affordable health care, and adequate funding for education and other vital services. We must, of course, still hold persons accountable for their behavior and provide safety nets for those in danger, but compassionate and justice-seeking ministries can reduce stress and perhaps prevent potential abuse.

Posters, bulletin inserts, displays of educational brochures, and books in the church library can reinforce the church's preaching and teaching about attitudes and behaviors. Since some women tend to assume they deserve to be beaten, the church needs to state clearly that abuse is never deserved and violence is never acceptable. A safe, compassionate, and caring church climate, in which persons feel loved as they are - yet encouraged to grow spiritually, emotionally, and in their relationships - may increase the probability that persons will ask for help when they need it. While such efforts will not prevent all instances of domestic abuse, they may create an environment in which such violence is less likely. And hopefully, when domestic violence does occur, it will be recognized and dealt with effectively.

By shedding light on the traumatic impact and surprising extent of domestic violence, churches can help bring it out into the open where prevention, intervention, and healing can take place. We need to equip persons to recognize the signs of abuse and to know where they can find help for those caught in such devastating situations. At a deeper level, we need to shine light on underlying issues that may lead to abusive behavior, providing experiences that help persons grow in self-awareness, self-control, and self-esteem, and in the ability to communicate effectively. The church is in an excellent position to shed light on the subject of domestic violence, both by increasing awareness and by deepening understanding of the dynamics of abusive behavior. See Resources listed below.

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Resources for Shedding Light on Domestic Violence

Domestic Violence: What Every Pastor Needs to Know, by Reverend Al Miles (Minneapolis, Minnesota: Augsburg Fortress, 2000). The author explores the complex problem of domestic violence, offering guidance for ministering effectively with both perpetrators and victims. Warning of the dangers inherent in naïve and untrained approaches to such situations, Miles urges pastors to participate in domestic violence prevention training and to make referrals to trained professionals. Miles shows pastors how they may inadvertently blame the victims and encourage and excuse violent behavior. He also recommends specific strategies for ensuring the safety of victims and for holding abusers accountable.

Domestic Violence: What Churches Can Do, FaithTrust Institute, 2400 N 45th St., Suite 101, Seattle, WA 98103, www.faithtrustinstitute.org, 206-634-1903x23, 877-860-2255. This 20-minute video provides an overview of the reality of domestic violence and raises awareness of its prevalence, dynamics, and the attitudes and false beliefs that underlie both abusive behavior and the fear of leaving an abusive relationship. The accompanying study guide suggests approaches for helping persons caught in such relationships and steps for congregations to take in order to more effectively minister to such families. "Safety for the woman and her children has to be addressed first. After that has been ensured, ongoing support can best be accomplished by helping the victim find appropriate community resources and providing the support of her faith community as she starts the journey of healing and decision-making for the future. The most helpful support that the congregation can offer to the abuser is to hold him accountable, to support him in taking responsibility for his behavior and recognizing that he has a problem, and to stand by him as he seeks treatment from a specialized batterers' counseling program." (Study guide, p.19-20)

Opening the Door: A Pastor's Guide to Addressing Domestic Violence in Premarital Counseling, by Susan Yarrow Morris (Seattle: Faithtrust Institute, 2006). The author defines domestic violence as "...a pattern of behavior used by one partner in an intimate relationship to establish power and control over another person through fear and intimidation, often including the use of or threat of violence." (p. 13). She provides a clear understanding of its dynamics and provides specific strategies, questions to ask, and information to share, not only in premarital counseling, but also in ongoing ministry and pastoral care, to prevent domestic violence and to intervene when abuse is suspected.

Stop Walking on Eggshells: Taking Back Your Life When Someone You Care About Has Borderline Personality Disorder, by Paul T. Mason, M.S. and Randi Kreger (Oakland, CA: New Harbinger Publications, Inc., 1998). The authors explore the emotionally abusive and controlling behaviors of persons with low self-esteem and fear of failure, as well as the impact of those behaviors on spouses, children, and others. This supportive guide shows readers how to make sense of their situations, take back control of their lives, heal their wounds, and protect themselves and others from further damage.

You Don't Have to Take It Anymore: Turn Your Resentful, Angry, or Emotionally Abusive Relationship into a Compassionate, Loving One, by Steven Stosny, PhD (New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, Inc., 2006). The author, acclaimed for his CompassionPower program for verbally and emotionally abusive persons and their families, provides information for understanding the dynamics and impact of such abuse and for taking action to change and heal the relationships and persons involved. This text, an excellent resource for individuals, couples, and small groups, provides instruction for healing the wounds from emotional abuse, for regulating feelings so as to avoid abusive

words and behavior, and for reconnecting in a relationship – or for determining that a relationship is beyond repair. Visit www.compassionpower.com to learn more about the CompassionPower program and for schedules of upcoming events.

Resources for Youth

50 Things Everyone Should Know About Dating Violence (brochure), The Dibble Institute for Marriage Education, P.O. Box 7881, Berkeley, CA, 94707-0881, 800-695-7975, FAX: 972-226-2824, Relationshipskills@DibbleInstitute.org, www.DibbleInstitute.org.

The Dibble Institute for Marriage Education (see contact information above) offers teach-out-of-the-box highly interactive and engaging programs which can be used with youth in church or public settings. ***The Connections Series*** and ***The Love U2 Series*** provide practical guidance for building healthy relationships by understanding attractions, infatuation, falling in love, emotions, how to gauge the health of relationships, and breaking up. Some sessions include dating violence prevention, assertiveness training, and skills training for communication and conflict management.

Resources for Developing Self-awareness, Communication, and Conflict Management Skills

Anger: Handling a Powerful Emotion in a Healthy Way, by Gary Chapman (Chicago: Northfield Publishing, 2007). The author states his belief that God designed human anger to motivate us to take action against injustice or wrongdoing. However, we often cause harm to others and ourselves by reacting without thinking through what has happened and how best to address our grievances – real or perceived. He offers a process for owning our anger and processing the situation in order to choose constructive, not destructive action. A study guide at the end provides suggestions for thirteen sessions.

Couple Communication, Interpersonal Communication Programs, Inc. (ICP), 30772 Southview Drive #200, Evergreen, CO 80439, 800-328-5099, icp@comskills.com, www.couplecommunication.com. This organization teaches couples and individuals to use an *Awareness Wheel*, *Styles of Communication*, *The Listening Cycle*, and a collaborative process called “Mapping an Issue.” This program requires certified leaders, who may be located at the website along with a schedule of events.

The Surprising Purpose of Anger. Beyond Anger Management: Finding the Gift, by Marshall B. Rosenberg, Ph.D (Encinitas, CA: PuddleDancer Press, 2005. Rosenberg, developer of the Nonviolent Communication program (www.nonviolentcommunication.com), challenges us to think of anger as a gift, pointing us to unmet needs, but often subverted by the judgments we make about others. He describes how to create strategies focused on meeting needs and to find solutions instead of just reacting. Visit www.cnvc.org/en/trainingcal to locate certified Nonviolent Communication trainers or events in your area or on the web.

Rodgers Christian Counseling, 1206 Jules Ct., Charlotte, NC 28226, 704-364-9176, FAX (704) 366-0729, www.soulhealinglove.com. This center presents a Soul Healers Workshop and publishes resources for engaged couples, married couples wishing to grow deeper in love, couples in crisis, and singles seeking a soul mate. Find events and resources at the website.

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