

The Sin We Hide From View

Domestic violence is an ugly problem—and it happens both inside and outside the church. We need to speak up if we hope to protect the victims.

Sandra Dickerson Murphy never told her church family about her abusive home situation. But week after week the then-18-year-old mother of two sat on the pew with black eyes and bruises. “No one would ask me about the bruises,” she says. “I was hoping that if someone would just ask me, that would open the door and I could tell them what was happening to me at home. But no one did, so I obeyed my husband and I kept quiet.”

Today her scars are impossible to ignore. In 1974 her husband pulled out a 12-gauge shotgun and fired it in her face. The blast left her permanently disfigured, but Murphy says she’s not unique. “Domestic abuse victims live with inner scars and sores as deep and oozing and disfiguring as any outward wounds we wear,” she says.

In the U.S. each year, more than 5 million incidents of “intimate partner violence” occur against adult women, according to the Centers for Disease Control (CDC). Another 3 million occur against men, though experts say most abusers are male. Such violence leads to nearly 1,300 deaths annually, the CDC reports.

Christian sociologists believe domestic abuse is just as prevalent among churchgoers. “When pastors say it’s not in my backyard, we can say that’s not true; we have the data,” says Nancy Nason-Clark, Ph.D., a sociology professor at the University of New Brunswick who spent 15 years studying domestic abuse among Christian families in the U.S. and Canada.

In June she launched RAVE, Religion and Violence e-Learning (), a Web site designed to assist religious leaders in

responding to domestic violence. Although more seminaries discuss domestic abuse in their classes and some ministers consider abuse as biblical grounds for divorce, Nason-Clark says her research shows that churches and clergy, for the most part, have “not taken the problem seriously.”

“Most pastors that have not been sought out by a domestic abuse victim have never spoke against it from the pulpit or in premarital counseling,” she says, “or made it clear they are approachable and really willing to help.”

She and Murphy, who has been divorced from her abusive husband for more than 30 years, join a chorus of Christian counselors and sociologists in calling on church leaders to offer domestic abuse victims support and counseling, and to reject any doctrines that condone family violence.

“The rate of abuse in religious homes across North America mirrors [that of] the general populace,” says Nason-Clark, co-author of *Refuge From Abuse: Healing and Hope for Abused Christian Women*. “However, women of faith are more vulnerable when they are abused [because], according to our research, they are less likely to leave, often look first to the church for resources and wait longer to seek help than other women. That is why it is so critical that pastors are trained to respond to this issue.”

‘Zero Tolerance’

During her early years as a pastor’s wife Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary professor Catherine Clark Kroeger, Ph.D., says she once found herself driving a young woman across icy roads to help her escape an armed and abusive husband threatening murder. But despite the apparent danger, Kroeger says she felt a nagging sense that she might be undermining the sanctity of marriage by helping the woman leave.

“For many evangelicals the uneasiness associated with confronting abuse in Christian homes springs in part from

their perplexity in interpreting certain biblical passages," Kroeger says.

After studying Scriptures addressing submission and government in Christian homes, Kroeger came to believe that there is no place for abuse in Christian homes. "Over a hundred times the Bible says that abuse—whether physical, verbal, emotional or sexual—is wrong, and within our church we must have zero tolerance for such conduct," says Kroeger, who has written extensively on domestic violence and the church, including in the book *No Place for Abuse*, which she co-authored with Nason-Clark.

Today Kroeger leads Peace and Safety in the Christian Home, an organization she co-founded to assist victims of domestic violence and help train Christians who counsel them. "We must proclaim intolerance of domestic abuse from the pulpits, teach it in Bible studies and talk about it in small groups," she says.

Although many ministers say they feel ill-equipped to address domestic violence, Kroeger says abused Christian women typically turn first to their pastors for help. "It takes enormous courage for a woman to admit she is being abused," Kroeger says. "We know that if the first person she turns to does not know how to respond or questions her, and if she is not believed, that woman is much more likely not to disclose the abuse to anyone else."

Janet* says she never considered telling her church family about the punches and shoves that sent her to the emergency room several times and eventually forced her to relocate and get a divorce. "What do you do?" she says. "At the potluck, you say: 'Please pass the salt. Oh, and by the way, my husband beat me again yesterday, and this time I really did think I was going to die?'"

As a child, Monica* did tell her California church and the

teachers at her Christian school that her stepfather beat and raped her and occasionally held a gun to her head while playing Russian roulette. But she says they thought she was being imaginative, so they encouraged her to honor her father and mother and not lie.

When she grew up, history began to repeat itself. Monica married an abusive man and at church, she says, "no one believed he did anything and pretty much made me feel it was my fault."

At couples counseling sessions with their pastor, she says she was told her marriage would be better if she were more concerned about what her husband wanted. But when they were alone, she says her husband told her he could kill her and make the church believe it was her fault.

"I wish the church would have at least listened and understood," she says.

"Honoring your father and mother, honoring your spouse gives no grounds to let someone beat ... you. I was led to believe that somehow it was God's will what was happening to me. For a long time I hated God. [I] ... didn't want anything to do with that kind of God."

Now single and raising a daughter on her own, Monica receives counseling through a local women's shelter. She sends her daughter to church but won't attend herself. She takes psychology courses at the local college hoping to someday work with abused children. "A part of me will always be that little child begging to be believed and seeking an open mind, a willing heart ... and some safe place," she says.

Kroeger says couples counseling often emboldens an abusive spouse. "Couples counseling in these instances only arms the abuser with ammunition to act out after the sessions and fuels the violence, putting the wife in more danger than before,"

she says. "Some couples don't even make it across the parking lot to the car before he is ranting, pushing and punching her [because of] what she said about him."

The Rev. Al Miles, author of *Domestic Violence: What Every Pastor Needs to Know*, agrees. "Perpetrators of domestic abuse, most of whom are male, are master manipulators," says Miles, who has served as hospital chaplain for more than 25 years.

"They can convince even experts in the field that their claims of contrition, remorse and repentance are genuine. In reality, most often these claims are simply a part of a perpetrator's slick scheme, in order to continue to get what he wants when he wants it."

Most abusers come from abusive backgrounds, says John Kie Vining, a bishop in the Church of God (Cleveland, Tennessee) and director of the denomination's Family Ministries department. Some have suffered a brain injury or another kind of trauma, he says. Others are simply immature and unwilling to take responsibility for their behavior.

But many churchgoing abusers also think the Bible justifies their actions. Vining says whenever headship and authority are interpreted to mean domination or control, "there is a misunderstanding theologically, and that gets acted out with the spouse."

Miles agrees. "The Greek text for certain words like 'headship' define 'leader,' as in the leader of a Christian home, as 'servant,'" Miles says. "When the Scriptures give credence to a man 'ruling' his children and his wife, clearly the Scriptures are referring to mutuality."

Author of *When Home Is Where the Hurt Is: A Ministry Intervention Guide for Trauma Victims*, Vining says he has seen some ministers worsen domestic abuse situations because of faulty theology. "I've had [ministers] who've said to the abused wife: 'You stay in that home, you take his punishment,

and you do that as a way to glorify Jesus or to serve the Lord,'" he says.

"That piece of advice, not only is it dangerous, it is not scriptural in the least. What you find in Scripture throughout the Old Testament is a progressive elevation of the status of women and children. And nowhere in the New Testament do you find [license] to abuse other people."

Miles says it is unwise for pastors not to seek out professional help with domestic abuse cases. "When I walk into emergency and operating rooms to have prayer and offer spiritual care, I never pick up a scalpel and start doing the surgery myself. The patient would surely end up dead," he says.

"It is just as dangerous when pastors take on the roles of counselors in abuse situations when they have no training in that area. Professionals need to do that.

"Clearly in these matters spiritual care is vital. However, pastors are well-intentioned but woefully undertrained in this arena and need to call on the shelters and the professional counselors and others trained in abuse matters."

Hope for the Hurting

Miles and others familiar with characteristics of abusers say the need to control forms the crux of violent behavior, and that leads many abusers to hold high positions in their professions—and in the church.

While serving as an assistant to her pastor's wife, Terri* saw the bruises that makeup never quite covered up and heard the harsh tones the pastor used when he thought no one was listening.

But when her own husband threatened to kill her, Terri still turned to her pastor for counsel. He told her she was lucky to

have a husband and family and that she should go home and thank God for them. "He was so busy dibbling in things he shouldn't have been doing," Terri says today.

Those "things," a prosecuting attorney later argued, involved sexually assaulting several young women in the church, including Terri's daughter. "Of course, the church people turned against me because they believed in their pastor," she says. "He had us kicked out of the church when I confronted him about what my daughter told me he did to her."

Although Terri was told Christians shouldn't sue, she pressed charges against the minister, and he is currently in prison. She has since divorced her husband and found a new church home, where she receives counseling.

Kendra*, a former pastor's wife, says her husband abused her for much of their 16-year marriage. Even on Sundays, after preaching sermons about love and mercy, he would come home to beat and berate her.

She says he eventually filed for divorce, saying God told him to leave her. Then he begged her to take him back. When she refused she says he came to their home with two loaded guns and a knife. He was arrested and convicted, but after his release from prison he returned to the pulpit.

Now, 16 years later, Kendra works with domestic abuse victims through a public-benefit organization she founded. She has a burden for pastors' wives in abusive marriages but helps women of all backgrounds address domestic violence and the related issues of homelessness, grief and loss, drug and alcohol abuse, and child custody and legal matters, as well as job training and money management.

Kendra's book on domestic abuse led to the creation of workbooks and training sessions. And she performs a one-woman play in public schools "to tell the story of domestic

violence, encourage awareness and prevention, and minister to those who need it most.”

Across the United States, other ministries are reaching out to those in need. Rahab International, a ministry of T.D. Jakes’ Potter’s House church in Dallas, partners with community shelters to assist domestic abuse victims. Murphy, whose husband shot her in the face, leads workshops on domestic abuse to educate pastors and community leaders about the need to assist those in violent situations.

Once verbally abusive himself, Houston-based psychotherapist Newton Hightower says uncontrolled rage cost him two marriages. Today the author of *Anger Busting 101* helps men resolve the anger addictions that can lead to violent and abusive behavior through his Center for Anger Resolution ().

In Grand Rapids, Michigan, Safe Haven Ministries () provides short-term housing to victims of domestic violence and offers counseling, support groups and legal advocacy. “Safe Haven was founded by six local churches who were set on creating something that others could use,” Executive Director Jennifer Marcum says. “It took a while for them to realize they needed the resources as well.”

Marcum says about 200 women and children live in the shelter each year, and another 500 to 700 are involved in Safe Haven’s nonresidential program. “Churches did not used to be aware they needed to be aware,” Marcum says. “Now most of them are beginning to wake up to that need.

“But being aware is not good enough. I would love to see someday a church that is focused on equipping people for healthy relationships, where prevention is part of the package, training our children, talking about boundaries, and what we should expect and what we should not tolerate from any other human beings.”

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How to Identify Abuse

Domestic violence can be defined as a pattern of abusive behavior in any relationship used by one person to gain or maintain power and control over another intimate partner. The abuse can be physical, sexual, emotional, economic or psychological. This includes any behaviors that intimidate, manipulate, humiliate, isolate, frighten, terrorize, coerce, threaten, blame, hurt, injure or wound someone.

Physical abuse involves hitting, slapping, shoving, grabbing, pinching, biting and so on. Physical abuse also includes denying medical care or forcing alcohol and/or drug use.

Sexual abuse is coercing or attempting to coerce a person into having any sexual contact without consent. Sexual abuse includes, but is not limited to, marital rape, attacks on sexual parts of the body, forcing sex after physical violence has occurred or treating someone in a sexually demeaning manner.

Emotional abuse is undermining an individual's sense of self-worth and/or self-esteem. This may include constant criticism, name-calling or damaging a person's relationship with his or her children.

Economic abuse includes making or attempting to make an individual financially dependent by maintaining total control over financial resources, withholding access to money or forbidding attendance at school or employment.

Psychological abuse involves causing fear by intimidation;

threatening physical harm to one's self, spouse, children, family or friends; destruction of pets and property; and forcing isolation from family, friends, school or work.

Sources: National Domestic Violence Hotline, National Center for Victims of Crime and .

To report domestic abuse or seek help, contact the National Domestic Violence Hotline () at 1-800-799-SAFE or 1-800-787-3224 (TTY); the Religion and Violence E-learning Project (the); Peace and Safety in the Christian Home (); or the Task Force to Stop Abuse Against Women (abuseof).

Domestic Violence: The Shocking Truth

The U.S. surgeon general described violence against women as the No. 1 public health problem of women in America. Statistics vary, largely because much abuse goes unreported, but more than 5 million incidents of "intimate partner violence" occur against U.S. women every year, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Three million such incidents occur against men, but experts say women are at higher risk for abuse.

At least three women are murdered every day by men who say they love them, according to the National Domestic Violence Hotline, and countless others are permanently injured or disfigured. The Journal of the American Medical Women's Association has reported that domestic violence is the leading cause of death in pregnant women.

According to the National Coalition on Homelessness, domestic violence is a primary cause of homelessness for women and children in the U.S. The National Center for Children Exposed to Violence reports that children who witness domestic violence are more likely to become abuse victims or victimizers as adults.

In their book No Place for Abuse: Biblical and Practical

Resources to Counteract Domestic Violence, Nancy Nason-Clark, Ph.D., and Catherine Clark Kroeger, Ph.D., report that incidence rates of domestic violence among active churchgoers are about the same as of the general population, but the likelihood of an abused woman seeking help might be lower. Therefore, they say, the potential for more severe violence to go unchecked is higher.

According to the book, roughly 25 percent of women in Latin America are victims of physical abuse; in South Africa one-in-four women is assaulted by her boyfriend or husband each week, and every week in Hungary a woman is killed by her spouse. Internationally, the World Health Organization reports that 20 percent of women are physically or sexually abused in their lifetimes.

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