

# **UNANSWERED PRAYERS: TEACHING NOTES**

**Mackenzi A. Huyser**

## **Case Summary**

Stephanie Underwood, BSW, a Family Advocate at the Unity Center, a Christian domestic violence center, begins to work with Rebecca. Rebecca brings many challenging issues of faith to the situation including the fact that she is a Christian, works at her church, and is living in an abusive situation with her husband. Tensions increase, however, when Rebecca makes a decision to end her marriage and the church terminates her employment because of her decision. Rebecca calls Stephanie in the middle of this crisis and Stephanie must decide how to approach this crisis situation.

## **Educational Level And Courses For Which The Case May Be Used**

This case was written for undergraduate social work students. It may be used for specialized instruction on religion/spirituality in social work practice, policy, diversity, and values and ethics, or, more generally, for instruction on social work direct practice, family treatment, case management, or human behavior in the social environment.

## **Learning Objectives**

Depending upon the focus of the course and the particular case discussion, students may learn:

1. Identify administrative policies and programs that impact the services and programs organizations provide.
2. Recognize the cycle of domestic violence and barriers to breaking this cycle.
3. Articulate client individual and environmental strengths and how strengths are built upon in the interview and intervention process.
4. Recognize the ways that religious commitments (on the part of clients, their social networks, social workers and/or FBOs) can complicate domestic violence interventions.
5. Understand the ways that religious beliefs may contribute to domestic violence.
6. Articulate professional ethical standards in the area of domestic violence.

## Discussion Questions and Answers

### *Facts*

1. What do we know about Rebecca?

*Rebecca is a married mother of two sons. She is a Christian and very involved in her church. She is also employed by her church as the Assistant Director of Music. Rebecca's husband began being violent toward her about five years ago.*

2. What do we know about Stephanie Underwood?

*Stephanie is a recent college graduate with a BSW. She works as a Family Advocate at the Unity Center, a Christian domestic violence agency. Stephanie has been married for two years.*

3. What do we know about Faith Presbyterian Church? Specifically, what do we know about its theology of divorce and beliefs about abuse? About church discipline within this church? About the role of women in this church?

*Faith Presbyterian Church believes divorce is against God's will. Church leaders believe they should be the ones to help make decisions about divorce and reconciliation of a couple and that a Petition of Relief or marriage dissolution petition should not be filed. The church seems to have a heavy reliance on prayer alone. They also believe in using church discipline (e.g., they suspend Rebecca's membership and terminate her employment with them). Rebecca thinks that the church does not value her opinion of the situation.*

*The church seems to recognize the gifts of women in the church (hiring women in various positions) and the fact that they were "impressed with Rebecca's vision for the music program." This specific case, however, points to a number of issues women might face in this church with regard to a system of male hierarchy. These examples include a disregard for the seriousness of Rebecca's situation (e.g., "several people told me to pray harder for my husband and our marriage"); Rebecca's feeling that "other staff discounted her reports of abuse in their relationship"; and the "lack of cooperation" reported by the church which "required church discipline and suspended Rebecca's membership status."*

4. What do we know about the Unity Center? What specific policies do we learn about which have a direct impact on the situation?

*The Unity Center is a non-profit private Christian organization supported by churches, private foundations, and United Way funds. The Unity Center has a board of directors, executive director, and seven professional staff.*

*One specific policy that has a direct impact on this case is the policy that requires all staff to be female and Christian. While this policy may appear to narrow the perspective of staff, it may in fact broaden the perspective of the agency. More specifically, in this case one will discover that Stephanie and Rebecca have different perspectives on this domestic violence situation and what*

it might mean for the institution of marriage (e.g., Stephanie's husband would be "out the door"). Additionally, female staff may also bring different perspectives about their rights and roles as women in domestic violence situations.

### **Analysis**

5. [Assuming students have been introduced to this topic previously:] What do we know about domestic violence and the cycle of domestic violence?

*Domestic violence occurs in many different intimate relationships such as between spouses, partners, or in dating relationships (Brewster, 2002, p. 24). Domestic violence may include any of the following types of abuse: physical abuse, emotional abuse, spiritual abuse, sexual abuse, or economic abuse (Brewster, 2002, p. 24; Chicago Metropolitan Battered Women's Network, 2003). In addition, domestic violence may include: verbal attacks, isolation, coercion and threats, and intimidation. Social workers practicing from a strengths perspective refer to a person experiencing domestic violence as a "survivor" rather than "victim" (Kirst-Ashman & Hull, 2002, p. 456).*

*The cycle of domestic violence tends to be characterized in three phases (defined differently by different authors). The first phase is the tension-building phase. This phase involves the build up of stress and tension. The second phase is the incident phase. This phase is where the abuser/batterer reaches the point of explosion. An incident of battery occurs. The third phase is the "honeymoon" phase. This phase occurs after the batterer has released (usually) his stress and tension, and expressed sorrow for what he has done and swears he will not do it again (Brewster, 2002, p. 31; Kirst-Ashman & Hull, 2002, p. 457). At this point in the intimate relationship the couple may "make-up" and expresses their love for each other (e.g., offering gifts, and paying careful attention to her and her needs [Brewster, 2002, p. 31]).*

*The cycle of domestic violence described above is extremely difficult to break. A number of different reasons may explain this difficulty. Some of these may include: economic dependence, lack of self-confidence, lack of power, fear of the abuser, adherence to traditional beliefs, guilt, fear of isolation, fear for their children, and love (Kirst-Ashman & Hull, 2002, p. 457).*

6. What kinds of domestic violence is Rebecca experiencing?

*Rebecca is experiencing emotional abuse in the form of isolation and "being cut off from the outside world." In addition, her husband is telling Rebecca that the abuse that is occurring is "all in her head" and suspecting her of an affair with a co-worker. Rebecca is also experiencing physical and verbal abuse in her marriage relationship. The physical abuse is in the form of being slapped and pushed by her husband. The verbal abuse is being called a "liar" and "cheater" for the suspected affair with a co-worker.*

7. What evidence is there for the "cycle of violence" in this case?

*The first phase of the cycle of violence is the tension-building phase. Some examples of this phase in the case include: the emotional abuse in the form of isolation and "being cut off from*

*the outside world”; by telling Rebecca that the abuse is “all in her head” and suspecting her of an affair with a co-worker.*

*The second phase of the abuse is the incident phase. Some examples of this phase in the case include: the physical abuse, being slapped and pushed by her husband, and the verbal abuse, being called a “liar” and “cheater” for the suspected affair with a co-worker.*

*The third phase, the honeymoon phase is not clearly evident in this case. Rebecca contacted the agency during the course of a crisis, she discussed earlier “honeymoon like” stages in her marriage relationship, however, these stages were not clearly connected to the presenting issue of domestic violence. A second possibility for the limited evidence of the honeymoon stage is that in situations of domestic violence, as the abuse continues and the pattern becomes more severe, the honeymoon stage may shorten or not be reported at all.*

8. How do Rebecca’s beliefs make it difficult to break the cycle of violence she is experiencing?

*Rebecca frequently refers to her church and her church’s and pastor’s beliefs about a marriage relationship. Some of the examples she mentions include: “Several people told me to pray harder for my husband and our marriage.” And “My pastor says the Lord can change people, and I believe what my pastor says so I continued to pray.” And finally, “My church does not believe divorce is ever an option.”*

*Because of these beliefs, it appears that Rebecca has not previously considered leaving the marriage relationship or ending the cycle of violence she is experiencing. The trigger event that forces Rebecca to make the decision to leave is the threat from her husband “to use the guns soon.”*

9. What are some “red flags” for Rebecca’s safety? What reasons does she have for concern?

*“Red flags” in Rebecca’s life include her husband isolating her from others, suspected manipulation of her relationships with coworkers, restricting her access to their finances, physical abuse, and threatening behavior toward her. Rebecca should be concerned out of fear for her own safety as well as for her children because of guns in the home.*

10. From our knowledge about domestic violence and the cycle of abuse, does Rebecca’s rapid response to the situation seem surprising? What about what appears to be her husband’s drastic change and Rebecca’s interpretation of his abusive behavior?

*Though Rebecca’s pattern of abuse had been chronic, over a period of five years, the escalation in severity of potential abuse (husband “cleaning his handguns this afternoon and told me he was planning to use them soon”) resulted in identification of a crisis situation and a call for help. Also, she had recently been educated by Stephanie regarding her options for help and escape. All of these factors could contribute to Rebecca’s call for assistance.*

11. Rebecca reports that she and her husband had gone through counseling before. What are some of the risks and benefits associated with this counseling done by the church? Also related, how can a person's congregation be a help or hindrance with its parishioners' marital problems?

*Churches can provide supportive environments to work through life's issues in the context of a shared faith. However, there are risks, when, in Rebecca's husband's case, inappropriate behavior is rewarded or rationalized. Rebecca's husband was reluctant to get help from the church and the church did little other than make Rebecca feel bad and tell her to pray harder.*

*In addition, many times pastors and counselors in churches are not trained in domestic violence situations and do not know how to counsel couples with serious relational issues.*

12. What is a Petition for Relief? What are some of the benefits of this petition? How protective is this petition? Where can Rebecca stay and still be protected with this petition?

*According to Minnesota law, a Petition for Relief restrains Rebecca's husband from committing acts of domestic violence by keeping him from their home and from an appropriate area surrounding their home. More specifically the law states: "A petition for relief under the Domestic Abuse Act is known as a petition for an OFP (Order for Protection) in cases of domestic abuse. A petition for relief may be made by any family or household member." (See link for additional details).*

*Some of the benefits of this petition and the order for protection include that a mandatory arrest will occur if the protection order is violated and the fact that this legal recourse provides a documentation of the violent situation Rebecca is experiencing.*

*This protective order is only a piece of paper, and therefore does not provide much physical protection for Rebecca. A couple of reasons for this lack of potential protection include the fact that Rebecca's husband could violate the order for protection. In addition, the criminal justice system and police officers have limited knowledge about domestic violence and rights of survivors being protected by the legal order. This is, however, the first step in starting the legal process and ending the abusive relationship.*

13. After Rebecca files the Petition for Relief she reports she is going to her sister's house for a couple of days. What are some of the risks and benefits of Rebecca using her family network for support versus the agency shelter system for support?

*Rebecca may be fearful that her husband will harm her family members if she utilizes her family support network. It may also be easier for Rebecca's husband to find her and the children at her sister's house. However, relying on family members with whom she is familiar may be helpful emotionally during this difficult time.*

14. How may Stephanie's age and experience influence her response to Rebecca? How does her view of domestic violence affect how she might help Rebecca?

*Stephanie is younger than Rebecca and has two years of experience working in domestic violence. Stephanie also is in a young marriage and reports, “making my feelings known about many issues in our relationship.” She is a strong advocate for equality and has made her husband aware of the fact that “if you ever threaten me like my clients are threatened, you will be ‘out the door’.” She balances this perspective with a determination to have a “successful, happy marriage.”*

*Because of these differences, she may view the situation without as much knowledge about domestic violence and its impact on Rebecca. In her personal life, Stephanie appears to be very strong in her attitudes about her marriage relationship. Because of this she must be careful not to push Rebecca too quickly or to act in the same way she believes she would act in her marriage.*

15. How does the funding structure in place for this agency impact how they work with clients, especially clients of faith who may be members of supporting churches?

*Because the majority of funds come from supporting churches there can be difficulties when the agency works with clients from supporting churches and the agency and church disagree on a course of action. Clients of faith may be hesitant to do what the agency recommends if it goes against what the church says about marriage.*

16. What situations arise from agency donors who may be supporting a cause, but unsupportive of specific actions and activities of the agency?

*Conflict could arise in situations where the agency feels restricted by the donors from suggesting or implementing actions that would contradict the beliefs of the donors.*

### ***Intervention***

17. When it comes to issues of domestic violence and faith, what role should social workers play, according to the Code of Ethics, to adequately protect people?

*The Code of Ethics focuses on a number of values, ethical principles, and ethical standards, which dictate the role a social worker should play in situations of domestic violence. The values and ethical principles emphasized in this case may include: social justice, social workers challenge social injustice; dignity and worth of the person, social workers respect the inherent dignity and worth of the person; importance of human relationships, social workers recognize the central importance of human relationships; and competence, social workers practice within their areas of competence and develop and enhance their professional expertise.*

*Additional Code of Ethics standards, which need to be considered, include the following: 1.02 Self-Determination; 1.04 Competence; 1.07 Privacy and Confidentiality; 2.05 Consultation; 6.04 Social and Political Action.*

18. How can Stephanie respond to Rebecca in a way that honors Rebecca's view of divorce, her church's view of divorce, and Stephanie's own view of divorce?

*Keeping in compliance with the perspective of self-determination, Stephanie can provide Rebecca with a safe place, information about services, and support to make decisions that are best for her regarding the issue of divorce.*

19. What alternatives does Rebecca have in this situation? How could Stephanie present those alternatives in an appropriate manner?

*In addition to the option of divorce, Rebecca could be presented with the option of staying in a shelter or transitional housing while she works toward reconciliation with her husband, if he is willing to make changes. Stephanie could provide additional information on services available to Rebecca, her husband, and her children.*

*Stephanie could present these alternatives by thoroughly presenting the possible benefits and risks involved with these options, thereby helping Rebecca to make an informed decision.*

20. What stages of crisis intervention must Stephanie address in this final moment with Rebecca?

*First, Stephanie needs to acknowledge the crisis, and address Rebecca's immediate need for safety; Stephanie needs to address the immediate situation with regard to options for housing and immediate safety. And finally, Stephanie needs to support Rebecca during this emotional crisis she is facing in her decision regarding her separation and divorce.*

## **Teaching Suggestions**

Instructors may use the case in a number of different ways depending on their preferred teaching style, their students' learning styles, the course selected for use, and the level of student. Some suggestions include the following:

- In combination with the case, have students read the "point of view" article listed in the print reference section (Sider, 2000). Use the sections on Capacity-Building: Increasing and Strengthening Holistic Faith Based Organizations; Education; and Funding from this "point of view" article to discuss benefits and risks of faith-based organizations providing domestic violence services. Additional questions to discuss with students may include: What ethical dilemmas do faith-based organizations face when providing domestic violence services, or more generally social services? Do these risks outweigh the benefits? (Should faith-based organizations not provide these services?) What role should faith-based organizations take in developing partnerships with congregations (e.g., funding, education)?
- Conduct an analysis of the current domestic abuse laws in Minnesota. How do these laws compare to the current laws in a student's state of origin or the state where they will live

and work in the future? Do any of these state laws widely differ? What implications will this have for clients in these states? If a number of differences exist, see if there are ways students can get involved in advocating for policy change at the state level. In many states this information is available on-line.

- Following analysis of the issues in this case, design a crisis intervention role-play that begins where the case ends: “I am on my way to see you. We need to talk about this situation.” . . . Rebecca was pulling into an open spot right outside the main door. In a matter of minutes she would be in Stephanie’s office looking for answers to deal with the situation.”

## **Additional Resources**

### ***Print***

- Brewster, M. P. (2002). Domestic violence theories, research, and practice implications. In Roberts, A.R. (Ed.), *Handbook of domestic violence intervention strategies: Policies, programs, and legal remedies*, (pp. 23-48). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Cassiday-Shaw, A. K. (2002). *Family abuse and the Bible: The scriptural perspective*. Binghamton, NY: Haworth Press Inc.
- Chicago Metropolitan Battered Women’s Network. (2003). *Domestic violence 40- hour training*. Chicago, IL: Centralized Training Institute.
- Kirst-Ashman, K. K., Hull, G.H. (2002). *Understanding generalist practice* (3<sup>rd</sup> ed.). Pacific Grove, CA: Brooks & Cole.
- Pellebon, D. A. (2000). Perceptions of conflict between Christianity and social work: A preliminary study. *Social Work & Christianity*, 27(1), 30-39.
- Roberts, A. R. (2002). Duration and severity of woman battering. In Roberts, A.R. (Ed.), *Handbook of domestic violence intervention strategies: Policies, programs, and legal remedies*, (pp. 64-79). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Roberts, A. R. & Kurst-Swanger, K. (2002). Court responses to battered women and their children. In Roberts, A.R. (Ed.), *Handbook of domestic violence intervention strategies: Policies, programs, and legal remedies*, (pp. 127-146). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Roberts, A.R. & Roberts, B.S. (2002). A comprehensive model for crisis intervention with battered women and their children. In Roberts, A.R. (Ed.), *Handbook of domestic violence intervention strategies: Policies, programs, and legal remedies*, (pp. 365-395). Oxford: Oxford University Press.



Sider, R. (2000). Maximizing the contribution of faith-based organizations to solve today's most urgent social problems. *Social Work & Christianity*, 27(1), 71-79.

Suttor, C.A, & Green, H. (1985). *Monograph #1: A Christian response to domestic violence: A reconciliation model for social workers*. Botsford, CT: North American Association of Christians in Social Work.

Zastrow, C & Kirst-Ashman, K.K. (2001). *Understanding human behavior and the social environment* (5<sup>th</sup> ed.). Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Thompson Learning.

### ***Internet***

Minnesota House of Representatives. (1998). *Domestic abuse laws in Minnesota: An overview*. Retrieved May 20, 2003, from [www.house.leg.state.mn.us/hrd/pubs/domabuse.pdf](http://www.house.leg.state.mn.us/hrd/pubs/domabuse.pdf)

National Archives and Records Administration. (2000). *Equal employment opportunity commission: Part 1604 Guidelines on discrimination because of sex*. Retrieved May 20, 2003, from [http://www.access.gpo.gov/nara/cfr/waisidx\\_00/29cfr1604\\_00.html](http://www.access.gpo.gov/nara/cfr/waisidx_00/29cfr1604_00.html)