

***PERSPECTIVES  
& APPROACHES TO  
DOMESTIC VIOLENCE IN  
THE CHURCH***

**THE PASTORS' WORDS**

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# THE PASTOR'S WORDS

*It is that one is not called to stay in violence. And we should try to stop the violence while loving both persons and trying to be supportive and seeking help for both persons.*

*Pastor Floray*

# PURPOSE OF STUDY

To improve understanding about the ways African American clergy think of and address partner violence in their churches

# *PARTICIPANTS*

- 8 clergy, Northeastern US
- 6 men and 2 women
  - 3 immigrants
  - 2 have professional experience in court systems
- Education:
  - 7 have Masters, 1 has Bachelor's with added trainings
  - 2 have professional Masters in the mental health field in addition to M.Div

# *PARTICIPANTS*

- 5 different denominations represented
  - a) African Methodist Episcopal (AME)
  - b) Baptist
  - c) Full Gospel Church of God (*self-ID; Pentecostal*)
  - d) Presbyterian
  - e) Seventh Day Adventist

# METHODOLOGY OVERVIEW

**Rigor** — trustworthiness, credibility, dependability, and authenticity

- ◉ interviews transcribed verbatim by researcher, transcriptions re-read as the recording was re-played to ensure accurate transcription (Milne & Oberle, 2005)
- ◉ transcriptions reviewed by participants to ensure accurate representation
- ◉ several participants also reviewed the findings and provided feedback (Seale, 2002; Leitz et al, 2006)

# *DATA ANALYSIS*

## To address researcher bias

- ✓ qualitative descriptive design
- ✓ conventional content analysis
- ✓ field notes of observations made during interviews
- ✓ open-ended questions—prevented any predictions

# LIMITATIONS

- Small sample size  
(usual for qualitative studies)
- Fewer women than men in study
- Gender differences not explored
- Regional differences in perspectives may exist
- Clinical parallels in content may not apply to clergy who do not provide pastoral care interventions directly.



# *WHY — RELIGION? AFRICAN AMERICANS? CLERGY?*

- ◉ Fundamentalists are more likely to go to clergy before other professional mental health (MH) providers
- ◉ African Americans seem to prefer faith-based organizations to address MH issues  
(Wuthnow et al, 2004; Brown, 2004)
- ◉ Clergy are change agents regarding health-MH and social interaction in African American communities (Taylor et al, 2000; Chang et al 1994)

# *WHY STUDY IPV?*

The Centers for Disease Prevention and Control (CDC) identifies intimate partner violence (IPV) as a public health problem that is preventable.

(CDC, 2006)

# *KNOWN RISK FACTORS*

- history of violence between parents
- history of victimization by violence during childhood
- drug and alcohol use
- presence of alcohol problems
- socio-demographics (income, more prevalent in ethnic communities)

# *DEFINITION*

IPV → Intimate Partner Violence

“one person’s abusive use of power to control another,”

Bent-Goodley & Fowler (2006, pg. 282)

Physical, sexual, mental or emotional violence and/or threatening or intimidating behavior

(CDC, 2006)

# FINDINGS

# OVERVIEW OF FINDINGS

- a) Contexts shaping the clergy perspectives
- b) Clergy perspectives: Secular & Theological factors of IPV
- c) Pastoral counseling training and training concerns
- d) Counseling practices: 'clinical' & divergent
- e) IPV and the pulpit

# OVERVIEW OF FINDINGS

- f) IPV and African American church: culture /  
silence
- g) Seeds of transformation
- h) Collaborating with churches

Summary, Recommendations, Future Research

➤ Context shaping perspectives

➤ Clergy perspectives:

*Secular & Theological factors of IPV*



*Wherever we go in the church, the church is the reflection of the leader's philosophic conception.*

*Pastor Brice*

## CLERGY INFLUENCE

*It's the senior pastor, who has the strongest influence—who is called, 'The Father of the Work'—that has the strongest influence.*

*(Speaker emphases)*

*Pastor Avery*

*The trust that the parishioners have in their pastor is a powerful tool in his/her hand to influence their lives. The pastor has a lot of power.*

*Pastor Caden*

## CLERGY LIMITATIONS

*Some people are already trained in the church, but they don't utilize their expertise; because [of] the leader [feeling] threatened.*

*Pastor Brice*

*The problem is, in some ways some pastors think, 'if I don't trust this person's faith' or 'if that person is lying' or '[this] thinking is contrary to mine, so therefore, I'm not going to let that person come to my church.'*

*Pastor Caden*

# *SECULAR ROOTS OF IPV; INDIVIDUAL & SOCIETAL FACTORS*

- ◉ Female esteem issues
- ◉ Male ego / esteem issues
- ◉ Male & female aggression
- ◉ Money, drugs & community violence

## *CLERGY PERSPECTIVES REGARDING IPV: SPIRITUAL FACTOR*

I feel that there is no spiritual integrity. God is not present. The Spirit of God is absent, and there is violence. And I feel that if the Spirit of God is not there, there is emptiness and the devil has a tendency to fill in the emptiness, and the result will be violence.

*Pastor Brice*

## **ROLE OF RELIGION FOR THE COUPLES EXPERIENCING IPV**

*Whenever Christians are involved in a violent relationship, they've compartmentalized their Christianity versus their reality. ...They will make no references to Jesus Christ, or spirituality at all until you bring it up (speaker emphasis).*

*Pastor Dana*

## HOW DO THE CLERGY DEFINE IPV?

I include serial adultery as a part of on-going domestic violence because of the damage it does to the spouse; the kind of horrific effect it has on them in terms of the suffered damage, and the fact that they find themselves, interestingly enough, very powerless to get out of that kind of relationship, in the same way that people who are in the physical violence are powerless to get out of that experience.

*Pastor Glen*

## ***SEPARATION & DIVORCE***

*If there's three or more events of abuse, usually the victim is preparing to leave and they come to the minister for justification for separation or divorce. I would advocate either/or, although it's difficult to advocate divorce. It's abuse; in my opinion is grounds for divorce. I don't think God wants anyone to stay in a relationship where they're being abused—not in a covenant relationship. (Speaker emphasis)*

*Pastor Dana*



- Counseling training & concerns
- Counseling practices
  - ‘clinical’ & divergent*

# *PASTORAL COUNSELING TRAINING & TRAINING CONCERNS*

*The training that I received is able to help me to do what I'm doing. But if I was going to go up to the level where I'm going to be the senior pastor of a work, I'd definitely go further in my training. (Speaker emphases)*

*Pastor Avery*

*Introducing me to an appropriate therapeutic counseling mode—teaching me about boundaries, giving me some exposure to some of the various ways that emotional health issues would present themselves, teaching more about knowing how to refer—[there was] nothing around sexual abuse, molestation, nothing around domestic violence nothing around intervention, addictions—the recovery process. So, that's what was absent that would be critical to have, being a pastor, looking back. (Speaker emphasis)*

*Pastor Glen*

# COUNSELING PRACTICES

- ◉ beginning where the client is
- ◉ not rushing the recovery process (giving person time to cope with the trauma)
- ◉ prioritizing interventions (triage)
- ◉ case management and advocacy
- ◉ reality testing
- ◉ referrals to community providers

## ***BEGINNING WHERE THE CLIENT IS***

*My whole thing is to first hear what people are saying, 'cause they will tell you what they need. They may not be able to articulate, "this is what I need," but they'll tell you. And you'll see what their frustration is, even if they come in and seem to be on the same page about some things, you just keep listening and you'll find out people are in different places.*

*Pastor Hayley*

# ***NOT RUSHING THE RECOVERY PROCESS***

*If you are in a situation, where you are being physically threatened, your first step, if you can't figure out anything else, is to remove yourself. So, we aren't talking about divorce right now, you gotta get out of that situation...and you gotta get enough distance, and enough time for your sanity to return.*

*Pastor Glen*

# ***CASE MANAGEMENT & ADVOCACY***

*The first occurrence is investigated with great seriousness.... I have no problem saying to a victim of domestic violence, “do you want to go to the police, do you want to file a restraining order, do you want to take out a complaint?” And if so, we will assist that person in doing that—even if it is against another member (speaker emphasis).*

*Pastor Dana*

# ***TWO WAYS CLERGY PRACTICE DIVERGES FROM CLINICAL PRACTICE***

*I would myself, you know, come and talk to each one separately, and try now to bring them together, and say... “how can we talk?”*

*Pastor Caden*

*It’s important for them to follow up with me [so I can] pray with them. Very important for me to pray with them...hear their concerns, maybe give them some scripture, some Word. They must have the Word of God mixed in with what the counselor is giving them (speaker emphases).*

*Pastor Avery*

## ➤ IPV and the pulpitis



## *IPV & THE PULPIT*

*All the clergy agreed that they can address partner violence from the pulpit, but disagreed about directly or indirectly addressing the topic.*

*By saying that, “you are a sinner,” ...it puts a block between you and me. It is better for me [as pastor] to go with an approach, a soft approach, than tell you exactly what I will do.*

*Pastor Caden*

*I think you confuse people, you know, when you beat around the bush, you need to be direct with people.*

*Pastor Erin*

## What is heard by couples: Pulpit preaching on IPV

	Husband	Wife
1	Not taught from the pulpit until violent incident in a celebrity couple; message—IPV should not be in anyone’s marriage, men don’t put your hands on women	Yes, maybe in the past 2 years; generally addresses comments to the men
2	Yes, specific information	Not very much
3	Yes, pastors actively discuss, specific info	Not taught from pulpit
4	Yes, a female pastor from pulpit, none of the prior male pastors	Yes (same church as husband)
5	Not taught from the pulpit	Yes, but a vague general message about what men should not do, “So if you operate amidst these guidelines, there is no domestic violence.”
6	Yes. “Mostly when something happen. Something big takes place, you’d hear, like one Sunday or two Sundays, after that you don’t hear it no more.”	Not taught from pulpit
7	Not taught from pulpit (attends irregularly)	Don’t know, but not in recent memory
8	Yes, taught from pulpit, “we did more things in reference to it outside of the pulpit.”	Yes from the pulpit, about twice a year, “the info is weaved into broader sermons.”

What couples hear:

Pulpit teachings on resolving marital discord

	Husband	Wife
1	Yes, often	Yes
2	Don't remember	Yes
3	Yes	No
4	Yes, but not often	Not from the pulpit
5	Possibly, but can't say for sure	Yes, "husbands, wives, study your mate."
6	Yes, on a regular basis	Long series some years ago (from pulpit)
7	All the time	All the time
8	Yes, elements in different sermons	Yes

# THE LEADING OF THE HOLY SPIRIT

*I think you need to be aware that the Holy Spirit doesn't put you in a tube that you don't connect with worldly issues, 'cause I think what we get from the Holy Spirit is certainly connected with what's happening in the world.... The Holy Spirit isn't like this little tunnel that won't allow you to talk about anything that's social....*

*Pastor Erin*

- IPV & African American church  
*culture / silence*
- Seeds of transformation
- Collaborating with AA clergy

# IPV & THE AFRICAN AMERICAN CHURCH: CULTURE

*I think a problem with the church also is that it's sanitized. The church sanitizes its own culture; so certain things do not come up because they are assumed that they would not come up—that they would not occur among Christian people. (Speaker emphasis)*

*Pastor Dana*

# IPV & THE AFRICAN AMERICAN CHURCH: SILENCE

*There is a silence in the church about it, and maybe then there is a theological reason for the silence—to overlook [IPV] or to be quiet about it; and even when others know they don't say anything. ... The same way, I think, in the larger society, the idea of not getting involved; you also have that parallel in the church sometimes until things get really bad, and then we [say something]. (Speaker emphasis)*

*Pastor Floray*

# SEEDS FOR TRANSFORMATION

## *Acknowledging the real need*

If we as leaders don't give the congregants the opportunity to feel safe when we share, then we silence them. *Pastor Avery*

Church has to break the silence. What stops the church from breaking the silence? Our leaders are not well trained to break the silence. ... If the leader does not break the silence, nobody else will be able to break it.

*Pastor Brice*



## *Collaborating with churches*

*Mental health organizations, in my opinion, reach out all the time to develop these partnerships. They reach out frequently. A church is a world within itself. ... You don't expect the health agency or the health management facility to have a biblical basis at all; most of them do not for the sake of their own funding. They don't. So that's a main stumbling block in developing stronger linkages and better bridges. (Speaker emphasis) Pastor Dana*

*I think Black pastors and community health centers and, hospitals and the larger programmatic structures that provide support to people who are either victims or perpetrators have to sit down. They actually have to start talking. They have to show up in the same room sometimes. (Speaker emphasis)*

*Pastor Glen*

# RECOMMENDATIONS

Social Workers need to:

- ◉ Identify and explore conflicts to determine if their assumptions are valid regarding religious and social work practice approaches
- ◉ Find common respectful language to build successful collaborations with religious communities
- ◉ Remember to apply a strengths-based approach to interactions with clergy the strengthen or create collaborations.

# CONCLUSIONS

- ◉ This study begins to dispel some misconceptions about clergy practice in cases of IPV
- ◉ It can be easy for formally trained clinicians to dismiss the experience-based skills that many clergy are able to provide their members.
- ◉ Culturally competent social work research must take place within the cultural contexts they occur. That means accounting for faith culture as well.
- ◉ Design research more inclusive of the interests and perspectives of this community, but also report the results back to the community

*Developing something specifically for churches, for African Americans.... (Speaker emphases) Pastor Erin*

# FUTURE RESEARCH

- ◉ Healthy religious families
- ◉ Non-documented victims of IPV in the church
- ◉ Pastor belief or understanding about the impact of IPV on the congregation
- ◉ clergy with longer practice tenures provided more intricate and structured descriptions of the ways they approached IPV that appeared unrelated to professional mental health education or experience
- ◉ how best to confront perpetrators of violence in the church

## IN THE PASTOR'S WORDS:

*One thing I would like to mention is we must see things differently. In the past, there are problems that were not addressed from the pulpit because nobody knew that those problems existed. But now we know the problems exist and we know what are the consequences....*

*Church should do a revolution....*

*Pastor Brice*