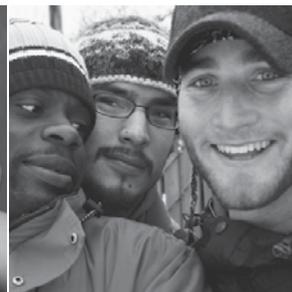


# SOCIAL WORK & CHRISTIANITY

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## **SPECIAL ISSUE – Marciana Popescu and René Drumm, Guest Editors**

Religion, Faith Communities, and Intimate Partner Violence

### **ARTICLES**

Christianity and the Experience of Domestic Violence:  
What Does Faith Have to Do with It?

“Because of my beliefs that I had acquired from the church...”: Religious  
Belief-based Barriers for Adventist Women in Domestic Violence Relationships

A Faith Community-Domestic Violence Partnership

A Refuge for My Soul: Examining African American Clergy’s Perceptions  
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Addressing Domestic Violence: Challenges Experienced by Anglican Clergy  
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Set Free Ministries: A Comprehensive Model for Domestic Violence  
Congregational Interventions

### **HOME STUDY**



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## STATEMENT OF PURPOSE

*Social Work and Christianity* (SWC) is a refereed journal published by the North American Association of Christians in Social Work (NACSW) to support and encourage the growth of social workers in the ethical integration of Christian faith and professional practice. SWC welcomes articles, shorter contributions, book reviews, and letters which deal with issues related to the integration of faith and professional social work practice and other professional concerns which have relevance to Christianity.

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# Religion, Faith Communities, and Intimate Partner Violence

*Marciana Popescu and René Drumm, Guest Editors*

**I**ntimate partner violence (IPV) affects women across cultural, socio-economic, and religious groups. Almost 15 years from the Kyoto treaty (1995) that created a global framework for preventing and addressing violence against women in general, and intimate partner violence in particular, high rates of abuse against women persist. This violence occurs too often by the people they trust most and within the communities they have come to depend on.

The Kyoto treaty prompted major changes in policies and services for women victims of IPV. Scholars' interests in research on women's issues and specifically on IPV dynamics have increased. However, much less has been done thus far to understand the contribution of religiosity and religious beliefs to IPV, either as an aggravating factor or as a healing tool (Popescu & Drumm, 2008). Some studies explored religious coping (Pargament, 1997; Mitchell et al., 2006), or measured IPV prevalence among specific religious groups (Ellison, Bartkowsky, & Anderson, 1999; Ellison, & Anderson, 2001; Cunradi, Caetano, & Schaeffer, 2002; Drumm, et al., 2006). Other studies analyzed religious communities, focusing on the effects of IPV on women in faith communities (Drumm, Popescu & Kersting, 2009), the specific needs of women experiencing IPV in such communities and the patterns of response from clergy and religious leaders to domestic violence (Nason-Clark, 1996, 1999, 2000). The findings from these studies have prompted scholars and practitioners to further explore elements of spirituality that could improve services for women survivors of IPV, to increase awareness of clergy and congregations on the issue of partner abuse and its causes and effects; and to propose alternative approaches to IPV.

Research studies show no significant difference in prevalence rates of IPV in religious communities compared to the general population (Battaglia, 2001; Brinkerhoff, Grandin, & Lupri, 1992). However, the pressure to stay in abusive relationships and to conform to specific religious norms and beliefs may be greater than in other population groups. Women in faith communities tend to turn to their clergy, pastors, or religious leaders for help, thus raising the issue of preparedness of clergy for this task. In the same way, social workers and other service providers to whom these women will reach out need to understand the complexity and specific dynamics of abuse within a religious context, and the impact of spirituality on the healing process.

This special issue of *Social Work & Christianity* comes as a response to the increased demand for an open dialogue on intimate partner violence among social workers and social work educators, clergy and faith communities, and secular agencies providing services for women experiencing IPV. The issue is organized into two sections. The first presents a number of recent studies that explore dynamics of IPV in faith communities, the clergy's response to IPV, and spiritual beliefs as barriers or as components of the healing process. The second section presents two practice models of working with women, clergy, and faith communities to address IPV.

Nancy Nason-Clark sets the stage by establishing the role of congregations and communities in addressing intimate partner violence. Sharing findings from over 20 years of research on domestic violence in religious communities, Nason-Clark highlights the importance of understanding the religious context and the ways in which the needs of women survivors of IPV, as well as the responses they get from pastors and congregations, are greatly influenced by religious beliefs.

Within this context, Popescu, Drumm, Mayer, Cooper, Foster, Seifert, Gadd, and Dewan explore the perspectives of women of faith in a conservative Christian denomination who have been abused and the internally and externally reinforced barriers based on religious beliefs that prevented them from moving away from abuse towards safety. Women's voices guide us through the painful journey they have to take and the ambivalence that characterizes this journey, as they try to find safety and healing while struggling to preserve their religious identity and their sense of belonging to a community of faith.

Snow Jones and Fowler discuss community partnerships and their impact in training clergy and improving their response to IPV. The

clergy's experience in dealing with IPV is further elaborated upon by Brade and Bent-Goodley, who explore African-American clergy's views of IPV, as well as their training needs and current resources, and by Petersen, whose article reports clergy's responses to IPV in South Africa in the absence of community partnerships and training that might create better awareness and improve practice.

The *Practice Notes* include two alternative models of addressing IPV in faith communities. Fisher-Townsend, Holtmann, and McMullin present one model in which web-based programming contributes directly to creating resources for clergy, faith communities, and Christian social workers, as well as secular agencies working with women victims or survivors of IPV from communities of faith. Danielson, Lucas, Malinowski, and Pittman present a congregation-based program that provides services to women experiencing IPV in their community.

One unique quality of social work is that it contributes to creating systems that address local and global issues through networks of care. It is our hope that this dialogue with faith communities and religious leaders will continue, allowing women's voices to be heard, while creating a premise for collaboration at all levels. Social work educators and practitioners in general, and Christian social workers in particular, ought to contribute directly to creating new networks of care while strengthening the existing ones, and to providing professional support for clergy, religious leaders, and community leaders, focusing on women's needs and rights and on spiritual beliefs as essential components of the healing process. ❖

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**Marciana Popescu**, Ph.D., is Associate Professor, Fordham University Graduate School of Social Service, 400 Westchester Avenue, Room 128, West Harrison, NY 10604. Phone: 914-367-3437. Email: [popescu@fordham.edu](mailto:popescu@fordham.edu).

**René Drumm**, Ph.D., is Chair and Professor of Social Work, Southern Adventist University, P.O. Box 370, Collegedale, TN 37315. Phone: 423-236-2766. Email: [rdrumm@southern.edu](mailto:rdrumm@southern.edu).

**Key Words:** intimate partner violence, violence against women, faith community, network of care.

# Christianity and the Experience of Domestic Violence: What Does Faith Have to Do with It?

Nancy Nason-Clark

*Many religious men, women, teens and children look to their faith community for guidance and practical assistance in the aftermath of domestic violence. Looking at the interface between religion and abuse from a variety of perspectives, this article explores several unique features of the journey towards justice, safety, healing and wholeness for a religious victim, or perpetrator, of domestic violence. Whether someone is helped first by their congregation or a community-based agency, those who respond need to understand both the issue of domestic violence and the nature of religious faith. Building bridges between the steeple and the shelter—or congregations and their communities—is central to responding compassionately, and with best practices, to domestic violence.*

**D**OMESTIC VIOLENCE IS A PERVASIVE REALITY THAT KNOWS NO boundaries of class, color, country, or faith perspective (Stirling, Cameron, Nason-Clark, & Miedema 2004; Timmins, 1995). Its prevalence around the world has been documented through statistics collected by government agencies, the World Health Organization, and the United Nations Secretariat (Kroeger & Nason-Clark, 2001/2010). Yet, religious voices are often silenced, or sidelined, and a holy hush still operates in many congregational or denominational circles (Nason-Clark, 2004; Fortune, 1991; Potter, 2007).

From the earliest days of the battered women's movement, there was a reluctance to see any perspective informed by religious language or passion as part of the *solution* to abuse (Brown & Bohn, 1989). Yet, it was undeniable that a woman's religious faith might shape her experience and disclosure of battery and the road she would choose to travel in her quest for wholeness in its aftermath (Boehm, Golec, Krahn and Smyth, 1999; Clarke, 1986; Fiorenza & Copeland, 1994; Halsey, 1984). There was mounting evidence that some abused women were turning to their religious leaders for assistance (Rotunda, Williamson and Penfold, 2004; Giesbrecht & Sevcik, 2000; Horton & Williamson, 1988; Weaver, 1993). But the story of what happened when men, women, and children looked to their faith community after terror occurred at home was yet to be told.

For almost twenty years, my research program has been attempting to fill this void through a series of studies—both quantitative and qualitative—aimed at understanding the interface between religion and domestic violence. Some religious survivors claim their faith sustains them through the protracted, ugly reality of domestic abuse. It empowers them, through spiritual and practical resources, to flee the abuse and seek safety and solace in a context free from the violence of the past. Others are consumed by the sacred silence, fighting demons both within and without. They are ultimately prevented from leaving behind the fear or reality of abuse.

There are many angles to the story of abuse in families of faith, some connected to survivors, or to perpetrators, or to those professionals who seek to offer them support or accountability in its aftermath. In this article, I propose to begin to unravel some of the complexities in the relationship between faith and domestic violence, and the struggle to build bridges between secular and sacred community response networks.

This article draws on results that emerge from the following studies:

- Tensions, Contradictions and Collaborations between clergy and transition house workers in Canada (Beaman-Hall & Nason-Clark, 1997; Nason-Clark, 1996).
- Pastoral Knowledge and Experience of Abuse in Congregational Life (Nason-Clark, 1997, 1998b).
- Pastoral Counseling and Abused Religious Women (Nason-Clark, 1999; Nason-Clark & Kroeger, 2004).
- Religious Women-Helping-Women Who are Abused (Bea-

man-Hall & Nason-Clark, 1997; Beaman-Hall & Nason-Clark, 1997b; Nason-Clark, 1995).

- Clergy in Mainline Denominations and Experience Responding to Abuse (Nason-Clark, 2000a, 2000d).
- Faith-Based Batterer Intervention Programs: a 10 Year File Study (Fisher-Townsend, Nason-Clark, Ruff, & Murphy, 2008; Nason-Clark, Murphy, Fisher-Townsend, & Ruff, 2003).
- Professionals Working with Male Batterers (Fisher-Townsend, 2008; Nason-Clark & Fisher-Townsend, 2005).
- Understanding the Stories of Men Who Act Abusively Over Time (Nason-Clark & Fisher-Townsend, 2008).
- Global Strategies to Understand and Respond to Abuse in Families of Faith (Nason-Clark, 2004).

I have attempted to harness some of the results from these selected studies to highlight four different perspectives, or experiences, which collectively help us to understand the web of connections surrounding Christianity and violence in the family context. Ultimately, we are challenged to ask: what does faith have to do with it?

#### **Four Perspectives on the Experience of Religious Women Who have been Violated**

##### **Spiritual Dimensions of the Journey for a Survivor of Abuse**

When religious women seek assistance from their pastor in the aftermath of domestic violence, they are looking for help with practical, emotional and spiritual needs (Nason-Clark and Kroeger, 2004). For women of faith, even some of the practical and emotional issues that surface have spiritual undertones. *Is it okay for a Christian to seek refuge at the local shelter? Should an abused woman enter the workforce, or continue to be a full-time mom? Does God expect a victim of her husband's abuse to forgive her husband seventy times seven?*

As a result, abused Christian women report that sometimes they feel pulled between what they perceive as the teachings of their church, including the behavior or advice of its leaders, and their personal safety and emotional health (Nason-Clark, 1999). Moreover, since many pastors do not refer abused women who seek their help to secular

community-based agencies, women who look for help in a variety of contexts (both within and beyond the household of faith) may feel that they have let their faith community down. Religious women suffering abuse are often disappointed to find that there is limited awareness and understanding of domestic violence by their leaders, modest knowledge of the resources available, and a lack of ability (or discomfort) to offer them help of an explicitly religious nature (i.e., prayer, Bible readings, spiritual counsel) (Nason-Clark, 1998).

When religious leaders speak out about violence during the weekly routine of church life, its impact on those who have been violated is profound (Kroeger, Nason-Clark and Fisher-Townsend, 2008). However, one of the best-kept secrets of congregational life is the support that women of faith offer to each other in and beyond the local church setting (Beaman-Hall and Nason-Clark, 1997b; Nason-Clark, 1995, 1997). One of the implications of this finding for those who practice social work is to gently encourage a woman of faith (who may feel cut off from her congregation or its leadership) to seek out other women in her church or religious network at her point of need. Like any disclosure of a personal nature, she will need to choose her confidantes wisely.

For over twenty years, through my research and speaking engagements, I have been hearing the stories of abused Christian women, told by survivors and those who have walked alongside them. Often their spiritual needs are primary on the road to personal well-being. Like a shattered window, an abused woman reports that her life as she knew it has been blown apart. Yet, the pastor and other community-based professionals, such as her lawyer, social worker, or advocates at a shelter, can help her to pick up the pieces of her broken life and reclaim strength and safety.

Many religious women want to maintain the illusion of an intact family (Nason-Clark, 1997; 2000a). She may be very reluctant to leave her husband and seek alternative solutions for personal safety and emotional health. She may cling unrelentingly to the promise she made, many years before, to love and honor her husband until death. She may feel it is her responsibility to keep on forgiving, to keep on trying to salvage the marriage, and to never give up hope that her husband might change. In point of fact, through our research we have found that most religious women who are abused do not consider themselves to be battered wives (Nason-Clark, 1996; 2004). On the contrary, they feel simply like their lives—and their families—are falling apart.

The resources that religious women seek in the aftermath of do-

mestic violence in part differentiate them from other abused women. They are often very reluctant to seek secular, community-based sources of support, preferring to look to others of like-minded faith for assistance—pastors and lay alike. Since many faith communities place the intact family on a pedestal, religious women are especially prone to blame themselves for the abuse, believe they have promised God to stay married until death, and experience both the fear and reality of rejection at church when attempts to repair the relationship fail.

It is imperative that those in the helping professions—like social workers—understand some of the unique and specific needs of clients who are very religious. As a bridge builder, a social worker can help to build an alliance between a community-based agency and communities of faith. Sometimes these bridges will be one person at a time: an abused woman on her caseload and her pastor. Sometimes these bridges will be agency or congregation specific: the mental health clinic and a downtown historic church. Other times, as a case manager, the social worker may be encouraging other professionals with whom she or he works to include a faith perspective around the collaborative community table.

In the aftermath of violence in the life of an abused woman, there are so many questions to be answered, questions that can only be addressed by someone with spiritual credentials, like a religious leader, or in-depth religious knowledge, like a faith-enriched therapist. Whether an abused religious woman first seeks help in a community-based agency or a church, she should be able to expect that her story of abuse is taken seriously, that she is given accurate, practical advice, that her safety and security is the top priority, and that her faith perspective is understood and respected. For many Christian women of deep personal faith, the experience of domestic violence in the family context is intricately intertwined with her spiritual life in such a way that it would be impossible to understand one separate from the other.

### **Perspectives of Men Who Participate in Faith-Based Batterer Intervention Programs**

Justice, accountability, and change are all imperative features of intervention services offered to men who abuse their wives or intimate partners. While some come voluntarily, most men who attend batterer intervention classes do so because they have little or no choice in the

matter—they have been mandated by the courts as a result of a conviction for domestic violence, or referred by wives, therapists and/or clergy as a final gap before the relationship is considered dead.

Religious women, in particular, are very hopeful that intervention programs can change violent men. Since many abused *religious* women do not wish to terminate their relationship with the abuser—either temporarily or forever—they hold out great faith that if only their partner were to attend such a program, the violence would cease and peace would be restored to the marriage. But is there any evidence upon which to base such hope?

In the first ever attempt to document empirically the characteristics of men who sought assistance from a faith-based batterers' intervention program in the United States, we analyzed over 1000 closed case files. Comparing this data to men in secular programs revealed that the faith-based program had a higher proportion of men who had witnessed or experienced abuse in their childhood homes, while rates of alcohol abuse and criminal histories were similar (Nason-Clark et al., 2003). Another finding to emerge from this data is the role of clergy in encouraging or "mandating" men who seek their spiritual help to attend a faith-based intervention program. In fact, men who were clergy-referred were more likely to complete (and graduate from) the 26 week program (followed by the six month monitoring phase, making a total of 52 weeks) than those whose attendance was mandated by a judge (Fisher-Townsend et al., 2008). Since the faith-based program participants have more life stability factors (currently married, employed, higher education, etc.) this may reinforce their willingness to complete the program and to alter their abusive ways (Nason-Clark et al., 2003). Sharing a religious worldview with the other men in the program may actually provide a *safe place* for these abusive men to challenge themselves and each other, and look toward a day when their abusive past will no longer control their present reality (Nason-Clark, 2004).

Some men in the program do not complete the entire 52-week program and "graduate." Rather, they drop out, or attend only periodically—when a crisis occurs or an ultimatum is given. Those who are court-mandated must complete 52 classes or face the implications of their non-compliance. In this state-certified program, there are several groups a week, each with at least 15 men and two facilitators.

The curriculum is not dissimilar to that of a secular program, but the agency's staff includes only men and women committed to their

Christian faith. When the men raise issues of spirituality, religion, or the Bible, the facilitators respond using the language of their various faith traditions. They are knowledgeable about the Bible and well prepared to counter any claims made by program participants that Scripture justifies abuse or violent acts. They hold men accountable using both secular and religious language. For men of faith, this is very powerful. Here a man's religious ideology is harnessed in ways that have the potential to nurture, monitor, and reinforce a violent-free future.

While we might be tempted to conclude that these results relate only to faith-based programs, there are some very important lessons here for those who work with the violated or those who act abusively. It is extremely useful to harness any spiritual resources that might add weight to either the criminal justice or therapeutic response to violence in the family context. For men of faith, the word of a pastor carries weight (Fisher-Townsend, Nason-Clark, Murphy and Ruff, 2008). Since many faith traditions offer a *language of hope* and a theology that includes *new beginnings*, building bridges between a religious man who acts abusively and his pastor increases the possibility of the man doing the work needed to change his behavior, while at the same time providing enhanced accountability as that work progresses.

Yet, there is great reluctance amongst batterers to assume responsibility for their actions (Ptacek, 1988b; Scott & Wolfe, 2000). When they begin the program, most of the men are unwilling—and some are unable—to interpret their acts as abusive. *I am not violent* is a common phrase used by the men in their early days of program attendance (Fisher-Townsend et al., 2008). Some interweave spiritual overtones. They talk about submission, or authority, or hierarchy in the family. But most talk only indirectly about these issues, choosing instead references to how she *pushed their buttons*. Men both justify what they have meted out to their partner and blame her for the abuse. Essentially, most of the men believe, at least in the early days of coming to the agency, that they are entitled to certain things in a relationship and angry when their expectations are not met.

When religious leaders are able to walk alongside abusive men who are committed to their religious tradition, everyone in the family has the potential of direct benefit. It is very powerful for a man who has acted abusively to see his faith community as supportive of his decision to change and pursue wholeness. In this way, pastors and other religious leaders are uniquely positioned to augment the process of recovery.

For social workers and others involved in the helping professions, it is critical to see the centrality of the religious belief system for many men who have acted abusively. It is a key component of their social context (DeKeseredy & MacLeod, 1998; Ptacek, 1988a), used to justify or defend their proclivity to power and control (Bancroft, 2002; Gondolf, 2002). Concepts such as submission reinforce these notions of religious entitlement (Shupe, Stacey, & Hazlewood, 1987). In this way, religious leaders and faith-enriched therapeutic staff are unique resources in any community-based efforts to create safe and peaceful homes. Faith is a core construct, central to any understanding of male entitlement, power and control.

### **Clergy Responding to Domestic Violence**

From our studies of religious leaders, we have learned how difficult it is for pastors to see their intervention as successful if the marriage ended in divorce. Many clergy feel pressure to keep families together and marriages intact. In this way, pastoral counselors frequently find themselves in a very difficult double-bind: they are stalwart supporters of family values, including a reluctance to see any couples divorce, yet many of the families who seek their counsel need to separate in order to ensure the safety of all. Often with limited training, and a lack of resources at their disposal, they have not yet learned to identify that it is the relationship that has failed, not their advice.

Based upon data from over 300 conservative Protestant ministers, we learned that 98 percent have counseled a woman who has suffered from her husband's verbal aggression, 53 percent have helped a woman where the physical aggression of her partner involved activities like shoving or pushing, and 29 percent of pastors have been called upon to respond to a woman who has been repeatedly battered by her intimate partner.

While pastors differ greatly in their counseling experience and the advice that they offer, we found no evidence in our studies with pastors that they deliberately or directly dismiss an abused woman's call for help (Nason-Clark, 1997). Translating the rhetoric of "happy family living" into practical help for women, men, and couples in crisis is no easy task. It is time consuming and emotionally draining for the pastor, it is often discouraging, there are few simple answers, and the rewards can seem to be in short supply. As a result, pastoral counselors sometimes feel like they are caught in the cross-fire between the ideology of the family that

their denominations and churches hold dear and the nature, severity, and persistence of male aggression and abuse. In reality, clergy are far more likely to offer practical advice and support than they are to provide direct spiritual counsel, or explicit religious activities like prayer.

However, pastors are often slow to suggest dissolution of even a violent marriage and quite optimistic about the possibility of change in the life of a man who has acted abusively. But clerical optimism is frequently tempered by the unwillingness of such men to engage in the therapeutic process or to change their violent ways. When abuse is obvious and unrelenting, clergy appear to be motivated to bring safety and security to all. However, when the severity and the impact of abuse are obscured by other factors like alcohol abuse, clergy appear to have greater difficulty both identifying the battery and understanding the need for safety or healing for the victims.

Referral networks can help to ensure that the experts are identified and that inadequate pastoral training does not translate into poor or life-threatening counsel for abused women and their children. For many religious leaders, faith is integral to any response to abuse. Through referrals, faith-enriched counselors in secular agencies, or personnel in faith-based counseling agencies have the opportunity to bridge the gap between religious and non-religious resources. By inviting religious leaders to participate in any coordinated community responses to combat domestic violence, secular workers in therapeutic or criminal justice environments become acquainted with the unique needs of highly religious men and women. As an added impact, religious leaders who may be reluctant to make the first step are educated about domestic violence and also benefit from their interface with counselors. As a result, clergy become better equipped to offer best practices to people of faith who suffer the impact of domestic violence, victim and victimizer alike.

### **The Coordinated Community Response**

Building bridges of collaborative action between community agencies and religious congregations is an enormous challenge. While recent years have witnessed many innovative projects that involve selected features of a coordinated community response, such as specialized domestic violence courts, or law enforcement officers who are uniquely trained to respond to cases of domestic violence and work in a multi-disciplinary context, most community-enhanced efforts to combat

domestic violence or respond to its victims do not include a role for spiritual leaders. However, pastors and other religious professionals play a critical role in calling religious men to accountability and offering spiritual and practical support to women and children who have been victimized by male aggression in the family context.

Over the years, our data has revealed several reasons why it is central to include religious leaders as part of any collaborative community response to domestic violence (Nason-Clark, 2006). These include the fact that religious leaders are chosen by many victims, chosen by some abusers, invested with moral authority, regarded as experts on marriage and the family, able to offer spiritual comfort and guidance, in regular contact with many who are marginalized by society, able to provide ongoing support after the crisis period is over, and skilled in talking about hope. Moreover, religious leaders provide educational and other resources to all age groups and many clergy have access to men, women and children at the point of individual crisis.

Religious women can be especially vulnerable when abused, for they are very likely to hold the intact family in high esteem and to consider separation and divorce as unsatisfactory options. Thus a community response needs to include input from various faith traditions if it wishes to meet the needs of all people who live in any given jurisdiction. When a pastor or other religious leader explains to a follower that “abuse is wrong” and a violation of how their faith tradition understands marriage before God, it has a powerful impact, much more powerful than the same words spoken by a social worker to an abused religious woman. Of course, not all members of faith communities will want assistance from their religious leader when domestic violence impacts the family home. However, for those who do, it is critical that such help be made available; it is critical, too, that the religious leader be informed and comfortable with referring parishioners to community agencies that work with victims or abusers. Referrals between resource providers are essential, yet our data has revealed that among those clergy who are poorly trained to respond to domestic violence, there is a great reluctance to refer those who do come for their help.

Since many faith traditions celebrate “family values,” it is imperative that the leaders speak out when abuse becomes the reality of family life. A coordinated community response needs to include these voices—especially since they are invested with credibility by substantial numbers of people. As a result, they can offer comfort and guidance that is distinct from that

offered in community-based agencies. As religious leaders, they speak the language of the spirit—using the sacred texts, prayers, and other rituals inherent in their faith tradition. Breaking the cycle of violence often requires both the input of secular culture and support from the religious community and its leadership. There are specific religious contours both to the abuse that is suffered by people of deep faith and to the healing journey. As a result, many in the secular therapeutic community do not like to work with clients who are particularly religious (Nason-Clark, McMullin, Fahlberg and Schaefer, 2009; Whipple 1987). Without spiritual credentials, these workers find it difficult to challenge the religious ideation that is believed by the victim or perpetrator to give license to abuse.

For collaborative ventures between churches and community agencies to be successful in the fight to end to domestic violence—what I like to call paving the pathway between the steeple and the shelter—personnel from both paradigms must recognize the need to work together (Nason-Clark, 1997). A cultural language that is devoid of religious symbols, meanings, and legitimacy is relatively powerless to alter a religious victim's resolve to stay in the marriage no matter what the cost. Moreover, curbing violent behavior amongst religious men who believe they are entitled by their tradition to behave in this way must include spiritual language condemning the violence and religious resources to empower hope and change. Correspondingly, the language of the spirit must also include references to practical resources and secular knowledge. Otherwise, spiritual language alone may compromise a *victim's* need for safety, security, and financial resources to care for herself and her children or a *perpetrator's* need for justice and restraint.

Building bridges takes time. It is hard work. It involves negotiating the delicate terrain of egos, values, disciplinary boundaries, and divergent strategies for a common goal. Yet, there is evidence that when you choose carefully with whom you will build bridges—looking for those with skills, training, and commitment—it is amazing what a coordinated community response can achieve (Nason-Clark, Mitchell, & Beaman, 2004).

### **What Does Faith have to do with Domestic Violence?**

Based on twenty years of social science research, there is ample evidence that religious faith and domestic violence are co-mingled. The story of why a religious woman, man, teen, or child looks to his or her

faith community for help in the aftermath of domestic violence is replete with spiritual overtones, as it is with practical issues. The story of what happens when help is sought is more diverse. Looking at the interface between religion and domestic violence from different vantage points reveals several unique features of the journey towards justice, safety, healing, and wholeness for a religious victim or perpetrator of abuse. Whether an abused religious woman, or a religious man who acts abusively, is offered help first by their church, or through a community-based agency, it is critical that those who respond understand *both* the issue of domestic violence and the nature of religious faith. While safety and security must always be the first priority, accurate, practical advice is also imperative, offered in a way that respects one's faith traditions and professional best practices. Assisting men and women of deep faith in the aftermath of abuse in the family context often requires an in-depth knowledge of that community of faith. Many of the religious issues that surface require dialogue with someone possessing spiritual credentials—like a pastor—or spiritual sensitivity—like a faith-enriched therapist. In this way, religious leaders and agencies that offer either a faith-perspective or faith-sensitive staff are unique resources in any community-based effort to create safe and peaceful homes.

Perspectives informed by faith must be *part* of the solution to a community-based response to domestic violence. Perspectives informed by secular training, experience and credentials must be *part* of the solution to a faith-based response to domestic violence. For this to happen—for bridges to be built between churches and their communities and for the movement between them to be bi-directional—there must be mutual respect and mutual understanding, built on a foundational belief that ending domestic violence involves the entire community. ❖

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**Nancy Nason-Clark**, Ph.D., is Professor and Chair, Department of Sociology, University of New Brunswick, P.O. Box 4400, Fredericton, NB, Canada E3B 5A3. Email: [nasoncla@unb.ca](mailto:nasoncla@unb.ca).

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**Key Words:** abuse, domestic violence, faith, religion, faith-based programs, faith-enriched workers, survivors of domestic violence, perpetrators, batterer intervention programs, religious victims, religious perpetrators, congregations

# **“Because of my beliefs that I had acquired from the church...”: Religious Belief-based Barriers for Adventist Women in Domestic Violence Relationships**

*Marciana Popescu, René Drumm, Sylvia Mayer, Laurie Cooper, Tricia Foster, Marge Seifert, Holly Gadd, and Smita Dewan*

*Intimate partner violence (IPV) affects women in all socio-economic and religious strata. The belief systems women rely on affect their ability to acknowledge and challenge the abuse in their relationships and move towards safety. This study explores religious belief-based barriers that deter women survivors of IPV in a conservative Christian community from changing their circumstances. The religious belief-based barriers identified by women in this study consist of an internal layer of religious beliefs and external social reinforcers strengthening these beliefs. Using the Transtheoretical Model of Behavior Change (Prochaska & DiClemente, 1984), we explore these belief barriers as they affect women primarily during the precontemplation and contemplation stages. The study contributes to the current literature in two ways: by presenting a set of beliefs that affect women in conservative faith communities, thus informing the practice of both social workers and clergy; and by introducing a new conceptual approach to change for women survivors of IPV in conservative faith communities.*

**I**NTIMATE PARTNER VIOLENCE (IPV) AFFECTS ALL POPULATION GROUPS across cultures, socio-economic levels, racial, ethnic, and religious backgrounds (Menjivar & Salcido, 2002; Tjaden & Thoennes, 2000). While prevalence rates, risk factors, and health effects of IPV have been explored extensively and are well documented in the current literature (Hamberger & Phelan, 2006; Kropp, 2008; Riggs, Caulfield, & Street, 2000; Tjaden & Thoennes, 2000), there is less research on religiosity and the impact of religion or religious beliefs on IPV. In the past ten years, social scientists have had an increased interest in religious differences and the role of religion as a protective factor or a risk marker contributing to IPV (Drumm, Popescu, & Kersting, 2009; Ellison & Anderson, 2001; Popescu & Drumm, 2008).

### **Why Women Stay: Barriers to Moving Away from Abuse and Towards Safety**

Factors affecting women's decisions to leave an abusive partner are mentioned repeatedly in the literature. Petersen, Moracco, Goldstein, and Clark (2004) examined motivators and barriers for leaving abusive relationships. They identified three main categories of motivators (gaining knowledge, reaching an emotional or physical breaking point, and growing concern about children's safety) and six core barriers (pressure not to talk about or address IPV, failure to recognize events as IPV or that IPV was wrong, self-doubt and low self-esteem, fear of losses, fear of perpetrator, or desire to protect the perpetrator). Other barriers identified in the current literature and mentioned by this study include shame (Liao, 2006), fear of retaliation from perpetrators (Anderson, Gillig, Sitaker, McCloskey, Malloy & Grigsby, 2003; Hamberger & Phelan, 2006), denial of abuse or minimizing the seriousness of abuse (Leung & Monit, 2008), feelings of entrapment and disempowerment (Menjivar & Salcido, 2002; Bealaurier, Seff, & Newman, 2008), belief that health/social service providers would not be able to provide an appropriate level of individual assistance (Anderson et al., 2003), and fear of reporting policies (DeVoe & Smith, 2003). One study underscored the common feeling that, despite the abuse, many women find it easier to remain in the abusive situation rather than face the many obstacles to seeking help (Petersen et al., 2004).

The barriers to leaving an abusive relationship are both internal and external. A number of studies address external barriers, varying from

service-related barriers and the women's perceptions of such barriers, to lack of resources (Fugate, Landis, Riordan, Naureckas, & Engel, 2005), race (Kaukinen, 2004), and cultural barriers (Erez, Adelman, & Gregory, 2008; Liao, 2006).

### **Religious Beliefs as Barriers to Moving Towards Safety**

A number of studies identify religiosity as a protective factor that lessens the negative coping behaviors of abuse survivors (Pargament, 1997; Shorter-Gooden, 2004). Specifically, one study notes that an increase in church attendance is associated with less emotional disturbance and spiritual disengagement among abuse survivors (Drumm et al., 2009). Conversely, religiosity can contribute to secondary IPV victimization. According to Nason-Clark (2004), among families of strong faith where abuse is present, there may be patterns of fear, vulnerability, and isolation paired with the promise to stay together until death do us part. Thus, the vulnerability to abuse is higher for religious women as they are less likely to leave, more likely to believe the abuser's promise to change, and commonly assume the blame for failing "their families and God and [for] not being able to make the marriage work" (p. 304). Nason-Clark (2004) finds women in faith communities reluctant to end their marriage due to a religious ideology that portrays worthy women as wives and homemakers. Explicit religious notions such as forgiveness and sacrifice make it especially difficult for IPV victims in faith communities to acknowledge the abuse and seek outside help (Nason-Clark, 2004).

Besides internally developed barriers for women of faith, Neergaard, Lee, Anderson, and Gengler (2007) identify some of the external barriers posed by clergy and faith communities to women seeking a way out. Their study finds that religious leaders have a valuable role to play in providing counsel to women in their congregations as well as to women in the wider community who come to them for guidance. Because clergy are often sought out first by women of faith, it is important that clergy are prepared to respond appropriately to the problem of abuse. Beaulaurier, Seff, Newman, and Dunlop (2007) state that clergy responses were most often characterized as maintaining the status quo while offering little practical help. The belief that marriage is for life, which may prevent women from leaving an abusive relationship, is further strengthened by clergy's most frequent response (Miles, 2000). Miles (2000) finds that ministers tend to believe marriage must be saved at all

costs and prefer “quick-fix” solutions such as “forgiving and forgetting the abuse” (pp. 149–150).

The current literature, when referring to barriers that affect women’s decisions to challenge the abuse in their relationships, includes language that mostly refers to leaving the relationship as the only solution to abuse. This study introduces a new conceptual approach to addressing abuse and change that is more inclusive and strength-based: *moving away from abuse and towards safety*. Under this approach, change, safety, and healing are central, while recognizing that leaving the relationship may occur.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Women victims of IPV in faith communities encounter a number of internal and external barriers that affect their ability to seek help and pursue change and move toward safety. The Transtheoretical Model of Behavior Change (Prochaska & DiClemente, 1984) is one model researchers have used in understanding the change process. This model proposes six stages of change: precontemplation, contemplation, determination/preparation, action, maintenance, and relapse. While originally used with people struggling to change addictive behaviors, the Transtheoretical Model of Behavior Change has been applied to individuals in abusive relationships as well (Anderson 2003; Dienemann, Campbell, Curry, & Landenburger, 2002; Haggerty & Goodman, 2003). This model has important limitations when applied to the process of leaving an abusive partner (Khaw & Hardesty, 2009) because it focuses on individuals’ efforts to change their own behaviors, and thus, it fails to account for the relational components that may be unique to the process of leaving an abusive relationship..

In the first stage of the model, precontemplation, people are seen as in denial of the problem. There is only a vague recognition that something may not be “right”; there is no full awareness of what the problem is. This lack of awareness may normalize abuse and prevent women from naming their experience as IPV. Generally, when a woman remains in the precontemplation stage, there is little hope of improving her situation.

In the contemplation stage, people weigh costs and benefits of change, start to define IPV as a potential issue, and wonder what to do about it. People in the determination/preparation stage of change try to determine the best course of action. There is an increased commitment

to prepare for change, for example gathering phone numbers and resource information for the future. People in the action stage are actively involved in the change process. In the case of domestic violence, this would include taking actions to leave the abusive situation or in some ways actively seeking safety. Finally, in the maintenance stage, people use their efforts to sustain the change and prevent relapse.

This analysis focuses on the religious belief-based barriers that Seventh-day Adventist (Adventist) women encountered as they moved from abusive relationships to safety. The Transtheoretical Model of Behavior Change will be used as a general framework only, to the extent to which it allows us to integrate findings in a larger context of change. Viewing these religious belief-based barriers through the lens of the theoretical model, we make some recommendations about how social workers and congregations can work together to reduce barriers to safety for women in conservative faith traditions.

## **Methods**

### **Research Design and Procedures**

The purpose of this study is to understand the lived experiences of Adventist women victim-survivors of spouse abuse. Our research question is: What religious belief-based barriers do Seventh-day Adventist women encounter as they move from abuse toward safety in their relationships? Because little is known about this particular subculture in terms of victimization and help-seeking, the methodology of choice was an inductive, qualitative approach. While religious beliefs differ within as well as between various church denominations, this study aimed to identify issues that might emerge from the perceptions of a sample of Adventist women. Researchers gathered data through in-depth interviews and focus groups.

For the in-depth interviews, researchers recruited participants through purposive, convenience, and snowball sampling procedures. By contacting pastors, conducting church presentations, and advertising in denomination publications, researchers recruited and interviewed 40 Adventist women who self-identified as survivors of spouse abuse. All participants were age 18 or older. Prior to collecting data, the research team received permission to conduct the study from Andrews University's Human Subjects Review Board and followed standard guidelines to protect research participants.

Three focus groups were conducted: two community focus groups with women living in an Adventist university community and a third focus group with women in a domestic violence shelter operated by a private Adventist entity. Researchers recruited participants for the community focus groups by distributing brochures in churches, health care facilities, schools, and shopping areas. For the shelter focus group, information about the study was mailed to the shelter's director, who distributed it to women in the shelter. Confidentiality and voluntary participation were emphasized when inviting women in the shelter to participate in the focus group. A total of 25 women participated in the three focus groups. There were no overlapping participants with the interviewees and the focus group participants.

### **Data Collection and Analysis**

Researchers used an open-ended interview guide to assist in getting similar information from all participants. All interviewers were trained using the interview guide prior to conducting the interviews. The interview guide inquired about participants' victimization experience, their attempts at help-seeking, the effects of abuse, and ways in which the church might implement programming for prevention and intervention. Researchers conducted face-to-face interviews with participants who were offered \$75 to honor their participation in the study. The interview time ranged from approximately one and a half to four hours in length.

The first step in organizing the raw data was to transcribe the recorded interviews. The research team members then reviewed the transcriptions for completeness and accuracy. Researchers used Provalis Qualitative Data Miner (QDM) software to facilitate the coding process. The analysis used the constant-comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

Researchers initiated analysis by coding participants' themes throughout the data. As coding continued in the analysis process, researchers examined specific instances of the codes to clarify similarities and differences between the researchers' use of these codes, improving inter-coder reliability. Researchers addressed the issues of credibility and trustworthiness of the data by using peer debriefing and conducting negative case analysis (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The research team met weekly to reach consensus on the emerging categories, themes, and types in the data.

## Limitations of the Study

In addition to the limitation inherent in qualitative studies and snowball sampling, this study is limited by its focus on a single denominational group of women. It would be beneficial to interview women and men of many faith groups to further understand religious belief-based barriers. In addition, the study is limited by the nature of self-selected participants in the research process. It is likely that Adventist women who were currently in abusive relationships may not have had an equal opportunity to participate in the study as women who have left their abusive relationship.

## Findings

Adventist women in this study encountered a number of religious belief-based barriers as they moved from being in their abusive relationships to experiencing safety. The findings highlight three categories of internal religious belief-based barriers that emerged from the analysis. Nearly all of the women in this sample (93%) held at least one of these belief barriers. These include beliefs about marriage and divorce, stereotypes about Christians, and beliefs about Christian gender roles. As women shared beliefs that held them in abusive relationships, they also revealed how these beliefs were externally reinforced by other people in their lives such as clergy, church members, family members, and partners.

## Beliefs about Marriage and Divorce

More than two-thirds of the women in this sample shared a belief about marriage and/or divorce that discouraged them from moving towards safety in their relationships. These beliefs did not permit participants to readily recognize that they were in an abusive relationship, to weigh the pros and cons of changing their situations, to get help, or to feel confident after leaving their abusive marriages. The types of beliefs about marriage and divorce that emerged from the analysis include the belief that marriage is for life and that divorce for any reason other than adultery is a sin.

### ***Marriage is for life; divorce is not an option.***

A predominant theme in the data regarding marriage and divorce is that marriage is for life; therefore, divorce is not an option. The women's

religious belief system then translates into a mandate to stay married. This view acted as a barrier by eliminating the possibility of change for the victim, or by promoting the idea that the sanctity of marriage outweighs the abusive circumstances. The following quotes from participants relate how this belief was a cognitive obstacle to altering their situations.

I believed that marriage was ‘til death do us part and it never entered my mind that anything else would ever happen (Myrna).

And that’s why I struggled with that [leaving] too, being a Christian and thinking, you know this is just the way it is...My husband would get mad and he would scream right in my face...but I promised, ‘til death do us part (Fanny).

I didn’t know if I was gonna survive it or not when we separated. I just always had the idea that I was married for life; there was no such thing as divorce in my vocabulary (Amy).

To me, you know when you got married, that was forever. You know, you forgive seven times seventy and God only gave us divorce because of our hard-heartedness...I think that [my religious beliefs] may have hindered, for making me believe that I needed to stay (Florence).

***Divorce for any reason other than adultery is a sin.***

Women in this sample voiced the belief that God hates divorce; they interpreted Bible teachings as allowing for divorce, but only in the case of adultery. Women did not give consideration to violence and abuse as a biblically-sanctioned reason for divorce; therefore, to get a divorce would be a sin. When their abusive marriages did not include adultery, women automatically excluded divorce as a possibility. These beliefs then became a barrier to change and movement towards safety. The following quotes from participants reveal their understanding of God’s comparative regard for divorce and abuse that created barriers to change.

I would not have stayed...if I knew he was also unfaithful. And, ‘cause see, then I had the biblical

grounds because all that time I thought, "I can't leave him anyway."...[If I hadn't had biblical grounds] I would have gone on and endured (Lana).

God is not happy without a good [marriage] relationship but He still hates divorce. Marriage is not problem-free. We believe we have to sacrifice (Emma).

I felt like you could [divorce] only if there was adultery or the husband remarried (Darlene).

### **External Social Reinforcement of Marriage and Divorce Beliefs**

Other people in the participants' faith community reinforced the belief that marriage is for life and that to divorce for any reason other than adultery is a sin. The following quotes from women note how clergy, church members, their husbands, and family members reinforced these beliefs. These external social reinforcements can intensify the women's own internal cognitive resistance to change, adding a layer to the already existing barriers.

#### ***Clergy.***

There has only been one pastor that has been positive...but the rest of them always believed that we should stay married no matter what (Joanne).

He's [the pastor was] more the person where it's [marriage is] a process; you just have to live through the process. Satan will try to get you at all angles; you cannot let him win (Florence).

#### ***Church members.***

Some people thought I should have stayed in the marriage no matter what and worked it out.

*Interviewer:* And who were those people?

A lot of them were Adventists...There was another religious neighbor across the street that wasn't Adventist, but very religious, that did not want us to get divorced (Kara).

Eventually I finally got to the point where I felt like I had to stay in the marriage because godly people were saying, “You need to just pray more. God can work this out. God can change his heart” (Mindy).

***Husbands.***

And, uh, then he started to use God’s Word and [church writings] pretty much on me. You know...”You should never entertain the thought that your marriage is a mistake,” and because spiritually he was a person that God used to open my eyes to spiritual things. And I was really in love with God and I was really in love with him (Nora).

***Family members.***

About six months after we were married, I decided that I had made a huge mistake and that I needed to reverse it and I left. The day I left he threatened to shoot me with an M-16 machine gun. He pulled it out and starting shooting the tires on my car. I left and went to my parents’ house, explained to them what was going on, and their thought process was that this was the decision that you made. And you know when you get married it is for life. You have to take the good with the bad. And I guess I always reached out to my parents thinking that they were going to be there to kind of console me and help me, but the attitude was always a pretty strict Adventist belief that once you’re married it is for life regardless of the circumstances. That God obviously put you in that situation for a reason and you need to deal with it and make the best of it. So I did. I went back (Dora).

**Stereotypes about Christians**

The stereotypes that many women (68%) in this sample held regarding Christians became barriers to understanding the nature of their abusive situations and therefore to addressing abuse in their marriages.

These stereotypes included the notion that Christians do not abuse others and that Christian marriages are essentially happy.

***Good Christian men do not abuse their spouses.***

Some women believed that if a person subscribed to a religious code of conduct, then abuse would not be possible. When women saw their husbands as otherwise “good Christians,” they were reluctant to see their husbands’ behaviors as possibly abusive. Therefore, this stereotype that Christians did not abuse their spouses served to block the thought that they might be in an abusive marriage, which in turn kept them from contemplating change. The following quotes from participants offer insights into how these thoughts played out in terms of a barrier to change.

And now as I look back I think, “What an idiot, why didn’t I just leave?” You know? ...but I kept thinking, I had met his parents, wonderful Christian parents, I thought...But his dad was an elder at the church. His mom, you know, was always doing stuff in the church and they were good Christians. I thought, “So this is ok”... [I began] confiding in the counselor to where she helped me realize it [abuse] is not normal. I mean she kept pounding into me, “This is not normal. What he’s doing to you is not what a Christian man does” Because in my mind, he was a Christian man (Karla).

But I didn’t have enough sense to question him because he was up preaching and teaching and leading. And I used to look at him and just be in awe at how the words would just flow (Nora).

***Christian marriages are happy.***

Women in this sample held stereotypes that maintained the belief that Christian marriages were essentially happy. As women began to grasp that “something is wrong” with this marriage, they often felt compelled to maintain an image of an ideal marriage or family. This need to project the expected picture of a contented marriage created a barrier for women to acknowledge to themselves and others that they were in abusive situations. The following quotes illustrate how their

stereotypes about Christian marriage interfered with authenticity and their ability to admit their reality of being abused.

You are part of a group of people who are looking at your life and you usually present yourself on Sabbath or Sunday with a perfect look and your family is just right. You don't want to mar the image. About the things that hold you in the marriage, you belong to a subculture and a different group of people who are on show all the time (Olivia).

In my case, I tried to hide it, because I didn't want people to know, you know. It's kind of a stigma and you don't want people to think of you that—how could you do something like that? How could you marry somebody like that? How could life be like that? (Dora).

I stopped going to church for about eight years because I couldn't continue living like this, you know, going to church every Sabbath and pretending like everything was so sweet and nice (Andrea).

### ***External Social Reinforcement of Stereotypes about Christians***

Women received messages from others in their faith communities that reinforced their stereotypes that good Christian men do not abuse and that Christian marriages are happy. The following quotes from participants reveal reinforcement of these stereotypes by others.

#### ***Husband.***

But in the meantime, while he's doing all of this to me, at church he is charming, he is loving. When the preacher asked us to come to the front, those who want prayer, my husband helps me to kneel down, he helps me to stand back up. You know, everybody is seeing how attentive he is and so forth (Betty).

#### ***Clergy.***

And I said, "Bobby is sexually abusing me and tying me up," and I felt that I could confide in him [the pastor] a little bit. And I said, "I need help." And then he

says ...”This is hard for me to believe...I have never seen any evidence of that in him. All the times I’ve ever been with him, he never even said a curse word or anything, so it’s hard for me to believe” (Karla).

***Church members.***

Well, the church family had a hard time understanding because whenever we were at church, he always had his arm around me. He’d be so good to me at church, but the minute we got in the car and drove off the church property, he’d let me have it for something.... When I finally left him, people wouldn’t even talk to me. I was doing him some wrong. They only saw his good side. I got so uncomfortable that I started going to another church (Darlene).

***Faith Community and Leadership.***

In the Adventist church is that number one, the leaders want the church to appear that everybody there is so righteous. Everyone there is ready for translation...Nothing bad can happen in the church, so therefore if you are having a bad marriage, you are too embarrassed to talk about it. You will not talk about it. And there you will wear this façade and you’ll say and go on as if everything is ok (Nell).

I think people think that Adventists are really good people and that [abuse] doesn’t happen in the church (Kara).

**Beliefs about Christian Gender Roles**

***The man is the head of the house and women must submit to their husbands.***

More than half (58%) of the women in this sample held beliefs about Christian gender roles, specifically the concept of men being the head of the household, which kept them from moving out of their abusive marriages. For this population, this idea of male headship refers to the belief that men are to be the head of the household and that women

must submit their will to that of their husbands. The following quotes reveal how this belief affects the daily lives and decisions of women in the case of abuse..

We have an idea that whatever the situation we have to submit to [our husband] and we believe God expects that no matter what (Kassy).

I felt that divorce was unthinkable and that I had to submit to my husband, that I had to somehow make this marriage work (Judy).

He was sexually very demanding and very violent during sex and I thought...that because it had been drilled in me by the church that I was supposed to submit to my husband. I thought that I was supposed to submit to whatever he wanted no matter how perverse, vulgar, or vile, and he would force me to perform sexual acts that I wasn't comfortable with and beat me during those acts (Kay).

### ***External Social Reinforcements about Christian Gender Roles***

The following quotes illustrate how the participants' beliefs about Christian gender roles were externally reinforced by other people in their lives.

#### ***Clergy.***

We'd had several sessions with the local pastor. You know, about problems in the home and I felt that he didn't see anything my way. The man is the head of the house and you know you've got to pretty much do what the head of the house decides. He believed man was the head of the house and I couldn't see that he got to make every single decision (Barbara).

#### ***Husband.***

He was one of those that would see the text and zero in on it. "Well, this text says the wife should be submissive to the husband." He zeroed in on that and took it radically (Veronica).

***Christian friends.***

And I got all kinds of Christian friends saying you're never supposed to say no to your husband. I tried not to say no (Brittany).

Why couldn't somebody show me that there was a way out sooner? That I didn't have to stay, because people were saying, "If you pray enough. If you have faith enough. If you just do good to him and meet his needs. Give in to him wherever you can, be kind to him. Fix his favorite meal" (Mindy).

***Family.***

I had already been programmed by my dad that when anybody superior asked you to do anything, especially if it was a male, that you were supposed to say yes. No was not an option (Joanne).

**Discussion**

The impact of IPV on women in faith communities is amplified by a belief system that obscures the notion of partner abuse and by the constant responses they receive from others in their immediate community. We have found three major categories of cognitive religious belief-based barriers that keep women in abusive relationships identified by the women in our study—beliefs about marriage and divorce, stereotypes about Christians, and beliefs about Christian gender roles. Each of these barriers acts internally, based on beliefs held and professed by women in faith communities, and externally, supported by views and perceptions of friends, family members, partners, church members, and clergy. These beliefs create cognitive barriers to change, manifested predominantly in the precontemplation and contemplation stages of Prochaska and Clemente's Transtheoretical Model of Behavior Change.

Internally, the beliefs about marriage and divorce affect women's definition of violence and implicitly support a normalization of violence in their relationships. If marriage is forever and divorce for any reason other than adultery is a sin, then Christian women are presented with two options: either IPV does not occur in the person's conscious awareness or abuse becomes normalized. With normalization of IPV

comes the acquiescence to abuse as a cost worth paying for the gain of an everlasting marriage. Divorce without adultery is considered a sin, which creates a premise of guilt for any woman that would consider such a way out. These cognitive contexts result in keeping women from initiating any substantial movement toward safety.

The second internal barrier is formed by stereotypes about Christians and Christian marriage that preclude women from acknowledging abuse in their marriages, naming abuse for what it is, and challenging the ingrained expectation of a perfect happy marriage as the norm for Christian families. The stereotype that good Christian men do not abuse keeps women in denial as they struggle with a deep contradiction between beliefs/expectations and reality. Although they might start to see the abuse for what it is and begin to contemplate possible options for safety in their lives, women in faith communities deal with the pressure of presenting an image of an ideal marriage to fit with their notion of being good members of their Christian community.

Christian gender roles constitute another internal barrier, contributing to women's tolerance of abuse in intimate relationships. This polarization of roles between male authority and women's submission, seen as divinely prescribed, intensifies the indecision when it comes to moving from abuse to safety for women in faith communities.

All of these categories of internal faith-based barriers have an external layer that reinforces and maintains a belief system contributing to abuse and preventing women from seeking safety or pursuing change. These external barriers are represented by the women's perceptions of the community's expressed views on marriage and divorce, Christian gender roles, and Christian marriage expectations.

Our findings reveal that many times women's most significant support systems are contributing to keeping them in abusive relationships, as marriage is preserved and valued above individual worth and safety. As women contemplate change and start moving towards safety in their lives, they are pushed back by their partners (who use religious beliefs to keep them in the marriage), as well as friends, families, and communities of faith.

Within the faith community, the pastor's position and message on marriage and divorce and on patriarchal gender roles may seriously limit women's options when it comes to pursuing change and safety. Women in our sample also referred to an institutional/corporate belief that Adventists are called "to protect God's reputation" (Ada), with

any attempt to disclose IPV being a threat to this quest, and a mark of imperfection that will affect the entire community.

The implications for social work practice include the need for understanding these double-layer barriers that may prevent women in faith communities from moving towards safety, especially if this leads them to leaving abusive homes. Furthermore, these findings contribute to a better response to what can sometimes be perceived as women's reluctance to talk about the abuse, or seek help outside their homes. The religious beliefs on marriage and divorce, Christian living and gender roles affect women's identity as well as their access to resources. These beliefs become crucial for social workers when discussing safety plans with women in abusive relationships or deciding on therapy approaches for women survivors of IPV in faith communities.

The Transtheoretical Model of Behavior Change serves as a framework to enable social workers in identifying religious belief-based barriers that affect women's decision making during the precontemplation and contemplation stages. Additionally, we can explore the impact of these barriers on the other four stages of change: How do these barriers continue to prevent women from determining what to do (stage 3), from acting upon their decision (stage 4), and from maintaining the change they achieved and preventing relapse (stages 5 and 6). As social workers assess the impact of trauma on women's lives, being familiar with the faith-based internal conditioning that is so obvious in these initial stages of change will assist understanding women's decisions and identifying factors that contribute to resiliency and healing. Using the strength perspective (Saleebey, 2006), social workers become facilitators in the process of change, empowering women to progress from the precontemplation and contemplation stages to the action stage, moving from abuse towards safety.

Knowing that deeply held religious beliefs often play a part in abused Christian women's decisions about their marriages, Christian social workers may benefit from a careful examination of their own beliefs about marriage and divorce, the stereotypes they hold about Christians, and their own convictions surrounding Christian gender roles. It may be important to ask, "How do my beliefs impact my thoughts, feelings, and actions toward Christian women struggling to make decisions about their marriages? Do I believe that the sanctity of the marriage vows take precedence over the well-being of the individual? Conversely, is it possible that my beliefs lead me to urge women in abusive marriages to "get out" of their situations, or to become frustrated with women for holding such beliefs?

Once Christian social workers take a closer look at their own beliefs, we would recommend that they take a more proactive approach in advocating for Christian IPV survivors. Christian social workers must bridge the gap between secular advocacy and shelter services and Christian IPV victims/survivors. Christian social workers could educate advocacy and shelter workers about typical beliefs that Christian women may hold so that they can be better prepared to work with the survivor from their own value system.

Finally, social workers also have a responsibility to educate pastors and church leaders about how religious beliefs impact their members' personal safety. Starting where the client is, social work practitioners will then take on their role as agents of change, and become proactive in advocating for pastor training on IPV, providing such training for clergy/religious leaders and faith communities, and creating empowering safe environments for women experiencing abuse in these communities. Ultimately, we hope that a better understanding of faith communities and barriers created by religious beliefs will empower social workers to build institutional networks and promote policy changes that will expand resources for women survivors of IPV, among secular and faith communities alike.

Social workers are uniquely positioned to act as educators, enablers, and advocates for religiously affiliated women suffering from IPV. We must become more intentional about educating congregants and clergy about the hidden nature of abuse among people of faith. In our roles as negotiators, mediators, and group facilitators, we must bridge the gap between churches and secular domestic violence programs by initiating dialog and developing meaningful working relationships. Above all, social workers should act to empower the faith community to gain increased competence and capacity to understand and break down barriers for those who come to the church hurting as a result of IPV. ❖

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**Marciana Popescu**, Ph.D., is Associate Professor, Fordham University Graduate School of Social Service, 400 Westchester Avenue, Room 128, West Harrison, NY 10604. Phone: 914-367-3437. Email: [popescu@fordham.edu](mailto:popescu@fordham.edu).

**René Drumm**, Ph.D., is Chair and Professor of Social Work, Southern Adventist University, P.O. Box 370, Collegedale, TN 37315. Phone: 423-236-2766. Email: [rdrumm@southern.edu](mailto:rdrumm@southern.edu).

**Sylvia Mayer**, MS, RN, is Associate Professor, Community Health Nursing, Southern Adventist University, P.O. Box 370, Collegedale, TN 37315. Phone: 423-236-2943 [smayer@southern.edu](mailto:smayer@southern.edu).

**Laurie Cooper**, BME, is a Social Work Research Assistant, Southern Adventist University, P.O. Box 370, Collegedale, TN 37315. Phone: (423) 236-2576. Email: [coopperl@southern.edu](mailto:coopperl@southern.edu).

**Tricia Foster**, BS, is the Executive Assistant for Academics, Southern Adventist University, P.O. Box 370, Collegedale, TN 37315. Phone: (423) 236-2805. Email: [tfoster@southern.edu](mailto:tfoster@southern.edu).

**Marge Seifert**, MSLS, is Public Services Librarian at McKee Library, Southern Adventist University, P.O. Box 629, Collegedale, TN 37315. Phone: (423) 236-2794. Email: [meseifrt@southern.edu](mailto:meseifrt@southern.edu).

**Holly Gadd**, Ph.D., is Graduate Program Coordinator and Professor of Nursing, Southern Adventist University, P.O. Box 370, Collegedale, TN 37315. Phone: 423-236-2961. Email: [hgadd@southern.edu](mailto:hgadd@southern.edu).

**Smita Dewan**, MSW, Research Assistant, Fordham University Graduate School of Social Service, 400 Westchester Avenue, Room 128, West Harrison, NY 10604. Phone: 914-367-3437. Email: [smdewan@fordham.edu](mailto:smdewan@fordham.edu)

**Keywords:** Intimate partner violence, abuse, domestic violence, Trans-theoretical Model of Behavior Change, religious belief-based barriers, faith communities, safety, women survivors, religious beliefs, clergy, pastor, conservative faith communities, social worker, Seventh-day Adventist

# A Faith Community-Domestic Violence Partnership

*Alison Snow Jones and T. Sharee Fowler*

*This article describes the conceptualization, development, implementation and refinement of a community-based partnership to train clergy and lay leaders to respond appropriately to domestic violence, to promote and strengthen faith community partnerships with local secular providers of DV services, and to promote effective prevention, identification, intervention, and treatment of domestic violence in congregations throughout the Winston-Salem, NC, area. Suggestions for Christian social workers and other helping professions are provided.*

**W**E DESCRIBE A COOPERATIVE FAITH AND COMMUNITY-BASED domestic violence (DV) partnership and prevention program in Forsyth County, North Carolina (Jones et al, 2005; Fowler et al, 2006). The key elements of the program stressed establishing partnerships between secular providers of DV services and faith communities and the challenges that secular and faith-based DV service providers may face in developing similar programs. We use the term “domestic violence” to describe violence between intimate partners.

## **Background**

Previous research indicates that abused women frequently seek advice and guidance from religious leaders (Alsdurf & Alsdurf, 1988; Beaman-Hall & Nason-Clark, 1997; Bowker, 1982; Bowker & Maurer, 1987; Hage, 2000). Research also indicates that faith leaders’ responses to DV may not be proactive or appropriate (Beaman-Hall & Nason-

Clark, 1997; Martin, 1989; Wood & McHugh, 1994) because most do not receive training about DV and report feeling unprepared to deal with such a complex issue (Bowker, 1982; Wood et al., 1994). This is unfortunate because recent research by Drumm & Popescu (forthcoming) in a sample of Seventh Day Adventists indicates DV has negative impacts on victims' spiritual beliefs and practices.

Church-based health education programs have been based on a variety of theoretical behavioral models, including social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1977; Bandura, 1986; Bandura, 1989; Winett, Anderson, Whiteley, & et al, 1999), and, in the case of problem behaviors (Prochaska, 1992), stages of change models (Voorhees et al., 1996). The program we describe focused on building self-efficacy through acquisition of key competencies and DV communication skills and used guided mastery, social modeling, and booster sessions to expand and sustain behaviors learned by faith leaders in DV training sessions (Bandura, 1992; Holman & Lorig, 1992; Maddux, 1995).

### **Faith Leader DV Training Program in Forsyth County, NC**

A committee that later became the Faith Leader Training Program (FLTP) of the Domestic Violence Community Council (DVCC) of Forsyth County met for the first time in September 2001, to begin planning a new way to reach and protect DV victims. Originally, five clergy (one African-American male clergy, one African-American female clergy, one white female clergy, and one white female Masters of Divinity candidate (subsequently ordained) and one Latina theologian) served as program trainers. They attended the Leadership Development Institute at Faith Trust Institute in Seattle in June 2002. The training they received, which was adapted over time to local norms and religious beliefs and to available local DV services, formed the foundation for the program described below.

Feedback from participants in preliminary training sessions indicated that the program should reflect local attitudes and religious norms. Low enrollments indicated that more effective recruitment methods were required. To improve the program, volunteer clergy and secular DV advocates adapted training materials and improved the appearance and arrangement of handouts. A policy that a clergy person and a lay leader from each congregation be trained together was adopted to assure that at least two individuals from each congregation would be trained and

could support one another. Program partners believed that this requirement would also boost attendance by male clergy who may perceive DV as a “woman’s issue.” At the request of early program participants, the program was expanded to a six-hour module delivered either in a single day or in two three-hour evening sessions over two weeks.

The basic components of the program included:

1. An **overview of domestic violence** by a secular DV counselor or advocate.
2. A **video or other resource** serving as a focal point for discussion about faith and DV. For Christian and Jewish audiences, the FTI’s video “*Broken Vows*” in English or Spanish, as appropriate, is used.
3. **Directed discussion, led by trained faith leaders**, of issues raised by the video or other resources and that are related to effective and appropriate DV response in the faith community.
4. A **presentation by trained faith leaders** that describes religious roadblocks frequently encountered. This includes:
  - a) Misinterpretation of sacred writings;
  - b) Misconceptions about key concepts of repentance, accountability, and behavior change;
  - c) Misunderstanding or minimization of the danger to the DV victim which may be exacerbated by religious messages about forgiveness and reconciliation; and
  - d) Fears that secular providers will invariably advocate for divorce or separation or be insensitive to religious beliefs.
5. A **presentation by a domestic violence counselor or advocate from the local shelter or DV service provider** describing appropriate responses to victims and batterers and how to access community DV resources.
6. A **packet** containing materials for disseminating DV information in faith communities.

A quarterly newsletter was published and mailed to all program participants and selected community faith leaders. The newsletter increased program visibility, provided participants with ongoing resources, and announced upcoming FLTP and DVCC events and trainings. The newsletter also publicized *Conversations in Faith* meetings, which were added later.

### **Brief Summary of Evaluation**

Details about the program evaluation have been published elsewhere and are also available from the authors (Jones et al., 2005). Pre and post training surveys of knowledge, attitudes and beliefs about DV were administered (n=49; 93% Southern Baptist) with six-month follow-up for six trainings. Results indicated statistically significant changes in clergy attitudes, beliefs about and knowledge of domestic violence, and knowledge about responses associated with victim safety (Jones et al., 2005). For example, the training program stresses the danger inherent in couples counseling when DV is suspected. One of the most important indicators of improvement in knowledge associated with victim safety was an item in which participants rated their agreement with a statement that clergy should provide couples counseling to an abused woman and her spouse. Responses were coded 1) strongly disagree; 2) somewhat disagree; 3) somewhat agree; and 4) strongly agree. Prior to training, the average rating (3.3) indicated that most respondents agreed with the statement. After training, the average rating (1.6) indicated that most respondents disagreed with the statement. The difference (1.7) was significant at the  $p \leq .001$  level and practically important as indication of a major change in knowledge. While the improvement diminished somewhat over time, there was still a significant improvement over pre-training knowledge (difference of .75;  $p \leq .001$ ) at six-month follow-up.

Other items associated with victim safety and improved attitudes and knowledge also demonstrated significant improvements. However, results of the six-month survey indicated that in addition to attenuation of training effects, program participants were experiencing frustration in providing assistance to victims. Participants expressed desire for a discussion forum focused on faith and DV issues. Quarterly “*Conversations in Faith*” booster sessions, organized around written material pertaining to faith issues and DV were added. They were conducted by a graduate student from Wake Forest University Divinity School and by the secular coordinator of the DVCC. In addition, focus groups of former program participants were convened to learn how to sustain clergy willingness to communicate about DV (Fowler et al., 2006).

## Highlights from Focus Groups

According to focus group participants, the initial impact of the training program was transformative. One outstanding example of transformation was the church that developed a *Spiritual Spa*, which was offered to women staying at the local women's shelter.

Our ladies just pampered them one Saturday. They manicured their nails, they had their hair fixed, and brought in professional masseuse and gave them a massage. They decorated the table up pretty and gave them a nice meal and then one of our women who is a gifted teacher and speaker shared a positive message of "You are special, you are beautiful."

Not only were the women ministered to in a tangible way, but also they helped put to rest commonly held misperceptions and stereotypes about women who experience abuse:

These are not just the lower class socioeconomic people; these are people who come from nice homes.

By including secular DV advocates, the training experience heightened awareness of community resources and strengthened faith leader trust in secular DV resources. Participants also expressed frustration at the reactive rather than proactive focus of faith communities and the larger community.

Choice of language was also found to be very important. "Domestic violence" and "training," put faith leaders off. They preferred adding a DV segment to existing ministries, such as "strengthening the family" rather than creating what would appear to be a new focus on DV:

Strengthening the family is a concept already well known and accepted in the church and could be more prominent in the workshop materials.

Participants also cited the lack of focus on batterers as a weakness. Most participants wanted to be able to support the batterer in ways that would lead to true repentance and transformation. To do otherwise, in many ways denies the core beliefs and values of most religions. It was also suggested that all materials be culturally appropriate and targeted to the various political streams within each denomination.

## **Essential Elements of a Successful Faith Leader Training Program**

### ***Religious Social Capital***

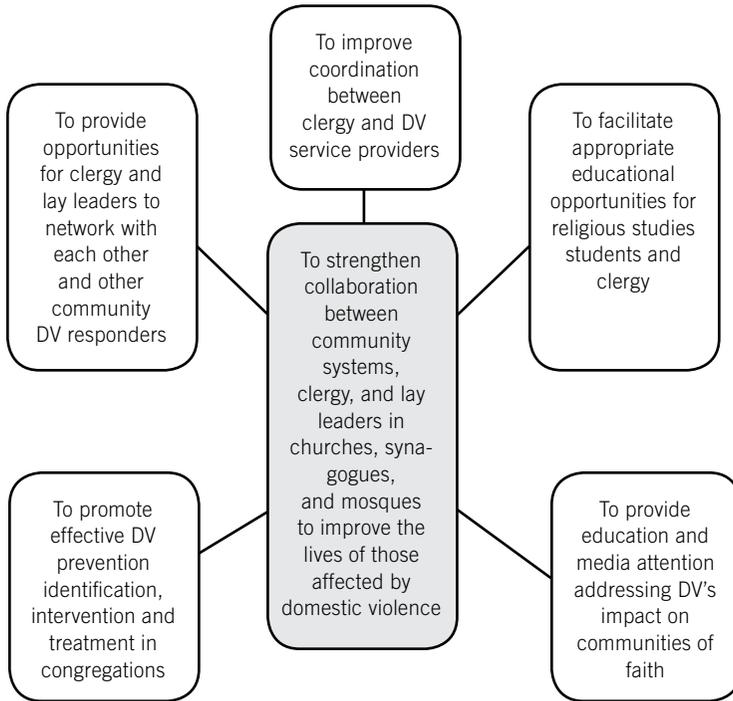
Winston-Salem ranked sixth in religious social capital compared to 40 other communities in the U.S., but had lower than expected levels of informal socializing outside of people's usual (often faith-based) social circles (Harvard University Saguaro Seminar & Winston-Salem Foundation, [http://www.hks.harvard.edu/saguaro/communitysurvey/results\\_matrix.html](http://www.hks.harvard.edu/saguaro/communitysurvey/results_matrix.html)). For this reason, Winston-Salem was particularly well-suited for such a program. High levels of religious social capital provided ready infrastructure for communicating DV knowledge and skills.

### ***A Group of Committed Individuals That Crosses Religious and Secular Boundaries***

A core group of potential allies, including the DVCC community coordinator, a DV researcher, and a group of Christian clergy and lay leaders, formed a committee under the auspices of the DVCC to consider strategies for approaching, engaging, and training faith and lay leaders to respond appropriately to DV. The committee identified goals for faith community outreach that fostered partnerships with secular community DV resources and developed a strategic plan. An overarching goal was to reinforce existing Forsyth County DV prevention and intervention programs in a way that promoted a cohesive community response to DV. The mission statement and objectives that resulted are shown in Figure 1.

### ***A Program That Is Informed by and Sensitive to Local Faith Traditions***

Committee members began by investigating DV programs throughout the U.S. Materials were obtained from the website of the Center for the Prevention of Domestic and Sexual Violence (CPSDV), now the FaithTrust Institute (FTI) ([www.faithtrustinstitute.org](http://www.faithtrustinstitute.org)). A general on-line search for program and training materials informed the group of resources that had been developed by various denominational bodies. The committee also became equipped to speak to on-line materials that provided problematic and dangerous misinformation.

**Figure 1: DVCC Faith Committee Mission and Objectives**

### ***Recruitment Resources and Strategies***

A local graphic designer donated design and development of a website ([www.dvcc.ws](http://www.dvcc.ws)), logo, and brochures in both English and Spanish. A Latina theologian committee member provided Spanish translations. Printing costs were covered by small grants. In addition, committee members increased efforts to engage and enlist local clergy and lay leaders. The recruitment strategy targeted denominational leadership and local minister's conferences, rather than blind mailings.

### ***Building Community Trust and Partnership***

Networking was critical to the successful development and implementation the program. A critically important contact was made with the Church and Community Ministries Coordinator of Pilot Mountain Baptist Association (PMBA), a primarily white Southern Baptist association comprised of 85 congregations in the area. The coordinator was highly committed to working to combat DV and using her influence

and position within the organization to promote the FLTP. Training sessions were promoted through organizational channels and advertised in the PMBA newsletter. A clergy and lay leader team from roughly 20 congregations was recruited to undergo training in the fall of 2003.

Success with PMBA helped to publicize the program and fostered networking with other centralized church organizations. Faith leaders and faith communities “compete” with each other for turf, for congregants, and for visibility. When one denomination devotes resources to a program like the FLTP and others become aware of it, it is easier to engage them. As relationships developed, the committee was presented with opportunities to become integrated into various organizations and to provide FLTP sessions. The FLTP committee also worked closely with leadership at Wake Forest University Divinity School to develop and co-sponsor two DV workshops targeted to faith and lay leaders. The first workshop resulted in FLTP committee members receiving an invitation to address two groups of Muslim women.

Over all, networking and workshops produced interest in and endorsements of the training program from leaders within six major Christian denominations: Episcopal Diocese of North Carolina; Winston-Salem District of the United Methodist Church; Pilot Mountain Baptist Association; the Peace and Justice Task Force of the Salem Presbytery; the Southern Province of the Moravian Church of America; the NC Baptist State Convention; Catholic Social Services; the Director of Hispanic Ministry of the Salem Presbytery (USA); and one Muslim congregation (Community Mosque of Winston-Salem). The FLTP committee also emphasized building and maintaining partnerships with secular DV service providers, law enforcement agencies, and representatives from the criminal justice system, resulting in endorsements from the Winston-Salem Police Chief, the Forsyth County Sheriff, the Forsyth County District Attorney, and the Mayor of Winston-Salem.

While partnerships and networking were essential to the growth of the FLTP, significant challenges remained. One barrier to recruitment was difficulty in reaching out to Christian churches with no denominational affiliation or hierarchy, including many African-American churches. Approaches employed included identification and development of relationships with allies in those congregations and working with the local conference for African-American ministers.

### ***A Curriculum Advisory Group***

Partnerships resulted in participation by a diverse array of spiritual leaders in shaping the program. Initially an informal process, a formal advisory group was developed to grapple with theological and other issues which arose in response to the curriculum as it was presented to different Christian denominations and congregations. In addition to the DVCC Community Coordinator and an academic DV researcher, the advisory group consisted of two white male evangelical ministers and two African-American females, one an ordained minister and one with a doctorate in theology, and an African-American male who is an ordained minister.

### ***Covenant of Performance***

One extremely important program component that assured program integrity was the “*Covenant of Performance*” that all FLTP participants are asked to sign after the first three hours of training (Appendix 1). The covenant was adopted to assure that participants recognize the primacy of victim safety and remain committed to partnership with FLTP. Covenanted participants agree that they will not undertake DV training within their faith communities unless it is conducted with the FLTP, that they have received FLTP training for clergy trainers, and that a secular FLTP DV counselor is included as a partner in any DV training they conduct.

### ***Communication***

Several other initiatives focused on communication with community partners: communication with former participants who serve as “missionaries” for the program; publication of a quarterly newsletter that provides information about DV, announcements of upcoming events and contact information; and quarterly “Conversations in Faith” groups facilitated by a Masters of Divinity candidate from the WFU Divinity School and an advocate from Family Services. “Conversations” provided a forum in which to discuss, problem-solve, and share successes and challenges in addressing DV.

### ***Academic Partnerships for Research Evaluation***

A partnership between secular DV service providers and academic researchers with experience in both DV and program evaluation enabled program advocates to accurately identify successes and problems and

to modify the program accordingly. Evaluation results were also invaluable in establishing program benefit for potential funders. Challenges included obtaining adequate funding for evaluation and building trust between service providers who are strong advocates and researchers who must remain objective. The latter required the researcher who acted as liaison between the program and evaluation to remove herself from data analysis.

### ***Program Sustainability***

The most difficult challenge for the DVCC Faith Leader Training Program was sustainability. A volunteer committee ran the program. Financial impediments, especially lack of paid staff, limited expansion and outreach. Finding individuals who were able to provide sustained direction, vision, and leadership along with a much needed time commitment was difficult. The committee continually strove for more stable and sustainable funding through grant applications to federal and foundation sources. However, having a few donors who were willing to provide small, but consistent, funding streams over several years was invaluable. They enabled coverage of basic operating costs associated with training sessions (handouts, refreshments), publicity (newsletter printing), and special initiatives, for example, guest trainers for the Muslim training sessions. Sustainable funding would have allowed working groups to develop DV training plans, training clergy trainers, and developing plans for implementing training modules for entire denominations and groups in Forsyth County. At present, the program continues to provide training when invited by faith leaders or community groups and to train divinity and pastoral counseling students at Wake Forest University.

### **Conclusions**

Each component described above must be adapted to a particular community. However, there are general conclusions that may be useful in developing such a program.

First, networking and trust building take a very long time when crossing secular-faith and inter-faith boundaries. However, trust is not sufficient. Without key individuals within organizations, no amount of trust will produce well-attended DV training sessions, especially well-attended by male clergy. Key individuals know how to place and market a DV training

program within existing faith initiatives and they have access to resources, such as meeting rooms and church newsletters. They can engage institutional support and they speak the institutional language. For this reason, it may be easier to begin by working within a single denomination to build trust and partnerships with local secular DV service providers.

Second, it is important for advocates, faith leaders, and members of helping professions to know that faith leaders are desperate for guidance about DV, even those who fear discussing it. Nearly every person who attended the FLTP sessions expressed a desire for other forums in which to discuss DV and for more time in which to share the challenges that DV presents to faith communities and their leaders. The video, *Broken Vows*, was unanimously cited as a powerful motivating force because of the testimonies it contains. Many of the FLTP sessions also witnessed courageous DV survivors stepping forward from among program participants to share for the first time their own DV stories and, often, their faith leader's failure to support them.

Finally, it is critical for faith leaders, faith communities, and faith-trained members of the helping professions to understand the crisis in faith that many victims experience when they turn to their religion, their religious counselors, and their faith leaders for help and guidance only to be told that their faith's teachings either tacitly condone the violence, fail to condemn the violence, or require that they continue to tolerate the violence. The spiritual wilderness in which victims and their children wander before finding the sanctuary they so richly deserve would daunt even the most devout of believers.

Until faith leaders, their communities and faith-trained social workers recognize that DV is also about spiritual violence, they may not recognize the critical role they can and must play in DV prevention and intervention. Building partnerships between faith leaders, faith-trained social workers, and secular DV service providers that are aimed at stopping DV represents an important first step toward a world in which the peacemakers are truly blessed. ❖

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**Alison Snow Jones**, Ph.D., Associate Professor, Department of Social Science and Health Policy, Wake Forest University School of Medicine, Piedmont Plaza II Winston-Salem, NC 27157. Phone: (336) 716-2014. Fax: (336) 716-7554. Email: [asjones@wfubmc.edu](mailto:asjones@wfubmc.edu).

**T. Sharee Fowler**, MA, Ph.D. Candidate, University of North Carolina at Greensboro. Email: [tsfowler@uncg.edu](mailto:tsfowler@uncg.edu)

**Key Words:** intimate partner violence, domestic violence, community intervention, faith

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### **Appendix 1: Domestic Violence Training Program Covenant**

The most important principle that guides the FIAC is that **NO ACTION SHOULD BE TAKEN THAT WILL ENDANGER THE DOMESTIC VIOLENCE VICTIM**. The victim's safety is the **most important factor** to be considered by members of faith communities as well as by members of secular organizations. Failure to observe this principle could result in severe injury or death of a domestic violence victim.

Materials used in these trainings have been designed and worded to assure that this principle is maintained. Any alteration of the DVCC FIAC Clergy and Lay Leader Training materials may place a victim at risk. Especially important are the proscription against couples counseling and the proscription against speaking to the batterer without the victim's consent.

In order to maintain consistency in domestic violence training and to stay informed about the latest information on domestic violence issues and legislation, the FIAC will provide an annual refresher/update training session which all domestic violence trainers must attend.

In order to insure that training includes accurate, current information about local domestic violence resources and programs, representatives from Family Services must participate in all domestic violence training sessions.

Participants in the DVCC FIAC Domestic Violence Clergy and Lay Leader Training Program agree to be bound by these principles as set forth in the following covenant:

DVCC Faith in Action Committee  
Domestic Violence Clergy and Lay Leader Covenant

**I agree that** in all matters pertaining to domestic violence victims, I will act to secure the victim's physical and emotional safety before addressing her spiritual needs.

**I agree that** I will not conduct couples' counseling when domestic violence is present in the relationship, and I will not encourage other clergy to do so.

**I agree that** no changes will be made to DVCC FIAC training materials nor will other materials be added or substituted for them.

**I agree that** misuse of sacred scriptures and teachings to justify domestic violence or to prevent a victim from seeking or obtaining protection and safety is abusive and places the victim in danger. I will not do this.

**I agree that** I will not conduct training sessions in my faith community using DVCC FIAC training materials and aimed at training other clergy and lay leaders without first attending a FIAC conducted train-the-trainers workshop.

**I agree that** I will not disclose information about victim identity that may have been revealed during training.

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Print Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Street Address: \_\_\_\_\_

City: \_\_\_\_\_ State: \_\_\_\_\_ Zip: \_\_\_\_\_

Daytime Telephone: \_\_\_\_\_

E-Mail Address: \_\_\_\_\_



# A Refuge for My Soul: Examining African American Clergy's Perceptions Related to Domestic Violence Aware- ness and Engagement in Faith Community Initiatives

*Kesslyn A. Brade & Tricia Bent-Goodley*

*There is historic evidence that African American religious leaders have advocated for the underserved and underprivileged by heightening awareness and engaging in initiatives focused on alleviating social ills. However, there is limited information regarding their perceptions surrounding heightening awareness and engaging in initiatives, particularly those related to domestic violence. This article seeks to fill this gap in the literature by describing the perceptions of a cohort of African American clergy seminarians related to domestic violence awareness and engagement in domestic violence initiatives within faith communities. Findings reveal (1) a perception of the presence of domestic violence in faith communities, (2) the need for additional training and preparation regarding domestic violence, and (3) the need for more domestic violence resource availability within and outside the church. Recommendations are made to social workers and clergy regarding their roles in heightening awareness and engaging in initiatives regarding the issue of domestic abuse in faith communities, particularly in faith communities of color.*

**H**ISTORICALLY, MANY AFRICAN AMERICAN FAITH COMMUNITIES AND their leaders have played significant roles in advocating for the underserved, serving the marginalized and addressing issues

on behalf of oppressed members of their communities (Brade, 2008a; Carlton-LaNey, 2001; Lewis & Trulear, 2008; Martin & Martin, 2002; Taylor, Ellison, Chatters, Levin, & Lincoln, 2000). There is a lengthy record of African American clergy's involvement in advocacy initiatives, and a growing record of their involvement in domestic violence intervention and association with advocacy-oriented organizations like the Black Church Against Domestic Violence (Bent-Goodley, 2006; Brade, 2008b; Fraser, McNutt, Clark, Williams-Muhammad, & Lee 2002; Williams & Tubbs, 2002). Although African American faith communities have been increasingly engaged in addressing the issue of domestic violence, there is limited information regarding clergy's perceptions of and experiences with domestic violence (New York Theological Seminary, 1995; Levitt & Ware 2006; Williams & Tubbs, 2002). This article seeks to fill this gap in the literature by exploring the perceptions of a cohort of African American clergy seminarians related to awareness of domestic violence and involvement in domestic violence initiatives within faith communities. Based on the findings, recommendations will be made to social workers and clergy regarding their roles in heightening awareness and enhancing practices surrounding the issue of domestic abuse in faith communities, and particularly in faith communities of color.

Domestic violence is defined as a type of interpersonal violence that emanates from a perpetrator's need for power and control and involves oppressive behaviors such as physical, emotional, verbal, psychological, and/or sexual harm or threat of harm between current or former intimate partners (Barker, 2003; Brewster, 2002; Rennison, 2003; Roberts, 2002). While we know that all communities of people experience some form of domestic violence (Centers for Disease Control, 2006; Conway, 1998; Roberts, 2002; Tjaden & Thoennes, 2002), and that there is some evidence that most African American homes, like those of other groups, are violence free the literature on domestic violence and African Americans suggests that domestic violence in the African American community is a pressing issue (Bent-Goodley, 2006). It has been stated that domestic violence prevalence rates are similar for African American women and White women (Lee, Thompson, & Mechanic, 2002; Lockhart, 1987). Still, others state that African Americans report domestic violence at a higher rate than Whites and other people of color (Catalano, 2004; Cazanave & Straus, 1979; Tjaden & Thoennes, 2000).

Though African American survivors suffer in regard to domestic violence, they often hesitate to seek help from traditional helping institu-

tions due to a number of barriers: issues of secrecy in African American families (Boyd-Franklin, 2003), lack of cultural competence by providers (Bell & Mattis, 2000; Bent-Goodley, 2004; West, 1999), and racism and racial stereotyping (Oliver, 2000; Gondolf & Williams, 2001; Richie, 1996; West, 1999; Williams & Becker, 1994). Racial loyalty, which may also be a barrier to help seeking, is defined in this context as when “the African American woman may withstand abuse and make a conscious self-sacrifice for what she perceives as the greater good of the community but to her own physical, psychological and spiritual detriment” (Bent-Goodley, 2001, p. 323). As a result of these existing barriers to help-seeking, African American survivors tend to rely on their own personal strengths and informal social networks, including their faith communities and African American clergy, to help them cope with the abuse rather than seek the services provided at formal helping institutions, which may or may not provide culturally competent services (Bent-Goodley, 2006; Fraser et al., 2002; Martin & Martin, 2002).

African American clergy are major components of the informal help-seeking network for domestic violence survivors (Bent-Goodley, 2006; Bowker, 1986; Bowker, 1998; Brade, 2008b; Fraser et al, 2002; Williams & Tubbs, 2002). However, little is known about how African American clergy view domestic violence. Because African American clergy play a crucial role in providing support, particularly for African American domestic violence survivors, it is imperative to understand their perceptions related to domestic violence awareness, as well as those surrounding involvement in domestic violence initiatives, particularly within their faith communities.

### **Literature Review**

Since the early research that called for the consideration of clergy in domestic violence research (Alsdurf & Alsdurf, 1989; Bowker, 1986; Ellsworth & Wagner, 1979; Fortune, 1989; Stacey & Shupe, 1983), there has been a growing body of literature focusing on the role of clergy. These publications have helped to inform what is generally known about clergy and domestic violence (Albright, 2004; Lundquist, 2001; Nason-Clark, 2000; Shannon-Lewy & Dull, 2005; Weinhold, 2004). Additionally, aside from the most recent reports (Levitt & Ware, 2006; Moran et al, 2005; Rotunda, Williamson & Penfold, 2004; Skiff, Horowitz, LaRussa-Trott, Pearson, & Santiago, 2008), empirical articles report data that

are primarily provided by domestic violence survivors or congregants, and not clergy or clergy of color (Bowker, 1998; Fraser et al, 2000). In light of these significant gaps, the literature review will briefly discuss what is known about clergy's perceptions of domestic violence awareness and engagement in domestic violence initiatives.

### **Clergy and Domestic Violence Awareness**

The existing literature suggests that faith communities and their leaders often struggle with acknowledging domestic violence (Albright, 2004; Bays, 2005). One researcher referenced domestic violence as a "closet crime" (Albright, 2004), while another noted that there is a "holy hush" that surrounds domestic violence in faith communities (Nason-Clark, 2000). Researchers suggest that the secrecy surrounding domestic violence is related to a number of factors including limited introspection regarding the issue (Albright, 2004; Bays, 2005), competing theological values related to marriage, divorce, and gender roles (Levitt & Ware, 2006; Shannon-Dewy & Dull, 2005; Skiff et al, 2008), and limited domestic violence training (Wolff, Burleigh, Tripp, & Gadomski, 2001).

While there are a number of clergy who do acknowledge domestic violence and are active in raising awareness of domestic violence (Fortune, 2006; Miles, 2003; Throop, 2008), there remains a need to increase awareness of domestic violence and the presence of domestic violence in communities of faith (Miles, 2003; Lundquist, 2001; Skiff et al., 2008; Weinhold, 2004). This effort to increase awareness regarding domestic violence must include an introspective process which helps leaders explore their own perceptions related to this difficult topic (Albright, 2004; Bays, 2005; Levitt & Ware, 2006).

### **Clergy and Domestic Violence Engagement**

The engagement of clergy in domestic violence-related initiatives, particularly those within faith communities, also present some challenges, such as secrecy related to domestic violence and limited knowledge regarding domestic violence information and resources. Nason-Clark (2000) conveyed an existing relationship between clergy awareness and secrecy regarding domestic violence, and domestic violence engagement. "The evidence for a holy hush amongst clerical leaders is four-fold: resistance to the phrase wife abuse; refusal to see church families as equally violent;

reluctance to preach against violence in the family; and interpreting reconciliation as recovery” (Nason-Clark, 2000, p. 362).

When clergy do become aware of a domestic violence occurrence in their faith community, some have engaged in practices that are not effective in addressing domestic violence. Some of these practices include providing counseling using inadequate, simplistic responses (Albright, 2004), presenting limited and rigid interpretations of Scripture (Brade, 2008b; Lundquist, 2001), not believing the survivor’s story (Alsdurf & Alsdurf, 1989), or providing biased perceptions that are shaped by gender-biased theological beliefs (Levitt & Ware, 2006; Shannon-Lewy & Dull, 2005). Several publications present the experiences of female survivors of domestic abuse who had sought pastoral care from a male member of the clergy and had received insensitive, inconsiderate, or simplistic responses from clergy (Albright, 2004; Brade, 2008b; Lundquist, 2001). While these negative responses may not represent all of the practices of clergy (Fraser et al., 2002; Neergaard, Lee, Anderson, & Gengler, 2007), the presence of such responses is cause for concern and a call for greater knowledge regarding the other clergy perceptions surrounding domestic violence (Nason-Clark, 2000; Neergaard et al., 2007).

### **African American Clergy and Domestic Violence Awareness and Engagement**

There have been limited studies that consider domestic violence and African American clergy. In a study focused on developing a culturally-specific, faith-based intervention to address domestic violence, pastors and lay leaders discussed their exposure and experience with domestic violence (Bent-Goodley, 2006; Bent-Goodley & Fowler, 2006). The authors noted that domestic violence was viewed as complex because it also brought issues of gender inequality and infidelity to the surface. Because domestic violence is fundamentally about power and control, the study brought recognition to latent power dynamics around gender that are noticed but not discussed openly within the population until the study. In addition, some male leaders discussed the challenge of confronting domestic violence if someone “has their own dirty laundry” such as infidelity to a spouse. The male participants felt that it was difficult to address the negative behaviors of another man if they were engaging in negative behaviors. As a consequence, although the behavior is acknowledged as wrong, it goes unaddressed. This

publication provided insight into African American clergy, lay leader and congregant's perceptions of domestic violence; however, it did not differentiate between the clergy, lay leaders or the congregants. As a result, it is difficult to distinguish the clergy's perceptions from those of the lay leaders and congregants.

The next study considers domestic violence from the perspectives of African American clergy. This study engaged the African American faith community in a conversation about domestic violence and other issues affecting the community (Williams & Tubbs, 2002). While participants identified physical violence as well as emotional and psychological abuse as components of domestic violence that are present in their communities, they also acknowledged that faith communities have overtly and covertly denied the existence of domestic violence in their congregations. While participants acknowledged that physical abuse has been addressed rarely, they also noted that the other components of domestic violence such as emotional and spiritual abuse, as well as the societal consequences of domestic violence have been unaddressed. Clergy participants indicated that there must be a holistic approach to responding to domestic violence.

The goal of one study which relates most directly to African American clergy's perceptions of domestic violence awareness and practices was to understand clergy's "perceptions on how the wider church community addresses domestic violence within the ranks of its own clergy and lay leadership" among people of color (New York Theological Seminary, 1995, p. 4). The researchers used focus groups to gather information from clergy and seminary students. An important finding from this study is that clergy of color have some awareness that domestic violence was an issue within their communities of service. This finding led to a call to clergy to engage in domestic violence initiatives that heighten awareness and inform their methods of addressing domestic violence with various populations.

The aforementioned articles have provided strong support for the current work involving the perceptions of African American clergy regarding their awareness of domestic violence and their engagement in domestic violence initiatives within faith communities and the broader community. Because most of the research related to domestic violence and faith communities provides limited considerations of clergy perceptions and race and ethnicity, it is important to consider the domestic violence-related perceptions of clergy of color. The current research

begins to fill the gaps related to perceptions, race, and ethnicity that exist in the literature. It reports the perceptions of African American clergy regarding domestic violence awareness and engagement of domestic violence related initiatives within faith communities.

### **Methods**

The research discussed in this article is part of a larger study that explored the domestic violence-related perceptions and experiences of a cohort of African Americans enrolled in graduate theological studies (seminary) and self-identified as clergy. The purpose of the research was to garner an understanding of clergy's perceptions of domestic violence, to understand their personal and professional experiences related to domestic violence. This article reports the findings related to participants perceptions surrounding awareness and engagement in domestic violence-related initiatives within faith communities.

### **Sample**

This exploratory study used a convenience purposive sample, composed of a sizable number of African American clergy seminarians. The nature of the sample limits its generalizability.

The sample consisted of 140 African American clergy: 88 females (62.9%) and 52 males (37.1%). While men dominate many seminary schools, the seminary school at this urban university has a large number of women in the program. Participants ranged in age between below 20 and 70, with a relatively even distribution between ages 21 and 60. Most participants were single (59.3%; n=83) or had no children (61.4%; n=86), while 57 (40.7%) of the participants were married and 54 (38.6%) had at least one child. The majority of the participants self-identified as members of various protestant religious traditions, with Baptist (37.4%; n=52) and Methodist (27.2%; n=38), comprising 64.6% of that protestant group.

For the purpose of this study, "clergy" referenced those who are authorized and/or are being trained to assume a position, the duties, or the service in the profession of Christian ministry: pastor, church administrator, evangelist, chaplain, missionary, Christian educator, pastoral counselor, youth minister, assistant pastor, campus minister, ministerial staff member, guest speaker, professor, teacher, or consul-

tant (Carpenter, 2001). Survey data were collected in seminary classes during the first three weeks of January 2008, as previously arranged between individual faculty members and the researcher. The study population consisted of 153 participants in an urban seminary school with 140 meeting the inclusion criteria. Specific sampling inclusion criteria were the following:

1. Self-identification as African American, which was defined as those of African descent born in the United States or one of its territories, *or* those from African descent born outside of the United States but currently reside in the United States.
2. Self-identification as clergy, which was defined as those who are authorized and/or are being trained to assume a position, the duties or the service in the profession of Christian ministry.

African American clergy were recruited from graduate theological programs of a University in a major metropolitan center on the East coast. The recruitment was conducted via posters and classroom visits during the first week of class meeting, and the study was conducted during the next class session. Participants received a minimal monetary award.

**Table 1: Demographics**

	Values/Types	Percentages
Gender	Female	62.9%
	Male	37.1%
Age Range	20	1.0%
	21-30	27.0%
	31-40	24.0 %
	41-50	20.0 %
	51-60	21.0 %
	61-70	5.0%
	Missing	2.0%
Marital Status	Single	59.3%
	Married	40.7%
Religious Affiliation	Baptist	37.4%
	Methodist	27.2%
	Pentecostal	10.7%
	Church of God	1.4%
	Assemblies of God	1.4%
	Seventh-Day Adventist	1.4%
	Church of God	.7%

## Measures

The self-administered questionnaire packet included questions regarding demographic characteristics, participant's current or past experiences with dealing with domestic violence while in their professional role, perceptions about wife-beating, and perceptions about domestic violence and faith communities.

**Demographic questionnaire.** Standard demographic characteristics were asked which elicited responses related to enrollment status, gender, age, citizenship, race and ethnicity, marital status, educational background, clergy status, ministry experience, theological position, and religious affiliation.

**Perceptions Related to Domestic Violence Awareness and Engagement in Domestic Violence-related Initiatives.** Perceptions related to domestic violence awareness and engagement in domestic violence-related initiatives were operationalized as African American clergy's attitudes and beliefs surrounding (1) an acknowledgement that violence occurs in church families, (2) religious practices within worship services regarding family violence, and (3) the facilitation of recovery through help and resource provision.

**Domestic Violence Perceptions.** In this study, *perceptions* were defined and operationalized as attitude and beliefs regarding various elements of domestic violence, such as justification of wife beating and help given to victims. *Perceptions* were measured using questions from the Presbyterian Panel Survey on Interpersonal Relationships (PPSIR) (Krause, Ellison, Shaw, Marcum, & Boardman, 2001) and the Inventory of Beliefs About Wife Beating-short form (IBAWB) (Saunders, Lynch, Grayson, & Linz, 1987). The PPSIR is a survey that consists of approximately 350 predominantly Likert-scale questions. Twenty-three questions of this instrument were used to measure perceptions.

The Inventory of Beliefs About Wife Beating (IBWB) assesses perceptions of domestic violence. Specifically, scales that relate to domestic violence perceptions are (1) justification of wife beating and (2) help given to the victim. The IBWB-short form is an 11-item Likert-scale instrument used to measure attitudes and beliefs towards wife beating. The IBWB has been used in a number of studies about domestic violence, and attitudes about women, and has an alpha coefficient for internal reliability of .61-.89 (Bent-Goodley & Fowler, 2006; Majumdar, 2004). The Presbyterian Panel Survey on Interpersonal Relationships is

a relatively new instrument. References to validity and reliability have not been noted in the literature. However, the instrument was deemed to have face validity by a panel of clergy and domestic violence researchers and, because of its specific design for clergy, it was considered the most appropriate instrument to use for this research.

### **Data Analysis Procedures**

Using statistically calculated parameters, an estimated sample size for a standard deviation of 15 based on a 1 sample t-test calculation was determined to be 73 subjects. The sample size for this study exceeded the required sample size of 73. Prior to analysis, data were entered into SPSS 16, cleaned, and all variables were examined for accuracy of data entry and missing values. Demographic data were analyzed to allow for comparisons between groups and with other studies. Using data from the Presbyterian Panel Survey for Interpersonal Violence and the Inventory of Beliefs about Wife Beating, frequencies and simple percentages were calculated to describe some of the perceptions that African American clergy hold surrounding domestic violence advocacy.

### **Findings**

Findings represent African American clergy perceptions regarding domestic violence awareness and engagement in domestic violence-related initiatives within their faith communities. The finding associated with clergy perceptions regarding awareness surrounds acknowledgement that violence occurs in church families. There are three sets of findings associated with clergy perceptions regarding domestic violence: the acknowledgement that domestic violence does occur in church families, the need for the increased inclusion of religious practices in worship services related to domestic violence, and the need to facilitate help provision for families experiencing domestic violence.

**Table 2: Findings**

Survey Item	Percentage	
	Agree	Uncertain or Disagree
<b><i>Perception of Presence of Domestic Violence</i></b>		
Interpersonal violence is a private family matter and not a concern of the congregation	8.6%	91.4%
I personally know someone in my congregation who has experienced a form of interpersonal violence	64%	36%
People with strong religious beliefs are less likely to abuse	18%	82%
<b><i>Religious Practices within Worship</i></b>		
I think worship should include prayers for victims of interpersonal violence	95.6%	4.4%
I think worship should include sermons on interpersonal violence	93.5%	6.5%
I think litanies in worship should include victims of interpersonal violence	71%	29%
<b><i>Facilitating Help Provision</i></b>		
The church does little to prevent abuse	76.3%	23.9%
Church leaders are often not prepared to help members of their congregations who are victims of abuse	84.2%	15.8%
I think our congregation should be provided with resources to educate us about interpersonal violence	98.6%	1.4%
I think clergy in my congregation are adequately trained to respond effectively to incidents of interpersonal violence	25.9%	74.1%
The church should provide training in how to recognize signs of abuse in others	96.4%	3.6%
Social agencies should do more to help battered women	97%	3%
Women should be protected by law if their husbands beat them	97.8%	2.2%
Wife-beating should be given a high priority as a social problem by government agencies	95%	5%

### **Acknowledgement That Domestic Violence Occurs in Church Families**

When asked if they agreed that interpersonal violence is a private family matter and should not be a concern of their congregation, 91.4% disagreed. Sixty-four percent of the sample acknowledged knowing someone in their congregation who had experienced a form of interpersonal violence, and 82.2% of the sample disagree that people with strong religious beliefs are less likely to abuse.

### **Religious Practices within Worship Related to Domestic Violence**

The majority of clergy agreed on appropriate elements in worship focused on overtly or covertly combating domestic violence. Almost all sampled clergy agreed that worship should include prayers for victims of interpersonal violence (95.6%) and sermons on interpersonal violence (93.5%). Seventy-one percent agreed that litanies in worship should include reference to victims of interpersonal violence.

### **Facilitating Help Provision**

Regarding African American's perceptions of practices related to facilitating recovery through resource provision, clergy suggest that there is a need for additional resources and education to facilitate heightened awareness and engagement in domestic violence initiatives. Approximately 76.3% of the sample agreed that the church does little to prevent abuse. In regards to preparation, approximately 84.2% agreed that church leaders are not prepared to help members of their congregation who are victims of interpersonal violence, but 98.6% felt that resources should be provided to congregations to educate them about the topic. Only 25.9% of clergy in sample agreed that clergy in their congregations are adequately trained to respond effectively to incidents of interpersonal violence while 28.8% were uncertain. Finally, 96.4% of the clergy sample agreed that the church should provide training on how to recognize signs of abuse.

Three questions from the Helping Provision scale on the Inventory of Beliefs about Wife Beating Survey also ascertained clergy's perceptions regarding initiatives related to domestic violence help and resource provision. Ninety-seven percent of the sample agreed that social agencies

should do more to help battered women. When asked if women should be protected by the law if their husbands beat them, 97.8% of the sample agreed. Finally, approximately 95% agreed that wife-beating should be given a priority as a social problem by government agencies.

### **Discussion**

Some of the descriptive findings from this study are not surprising. The study does confirm expectations related to three essential areas of domestic violence responses directly linked to the clergy's responses: (1) the presence of domestic violence in faith-based communities, (2) the need for more training and preparation in this area, and, (3) the need for greater domestic violence resources both within and outside of the church.

#### **Presence of Domestic Violence**

While the Church provides a place of safety and refuge, clergy seminarians seem to overwhelmingly agree it also harbors the same challenges as other institutions in society. Persons of faith or religious expression are not exempt from experiencing domestic violence. The majority (64%) of the participants knew someone in the congregation that had experienced domestic violence. Most of the participants did not feel that strong religious affiliation decreased vulnerability to domestic violence (82%). These findings emphasize that domestic violence affects persons attending church and that survivors are reaching out to and sharing their experiences with clergy, lay leaders, and/or other congregants. Consequently, it is imperative to create responsive, targeted approaches to domestic violence that are faith-based. Social workers can assist faith-based leaders by helping them design approaches to address domestic violence. Practitioners can also serve as a resource to the faith-based community by making connections with referral sources and building linkages with the professional community. These linkages can be helpful to allowing clergy to utilize critical resources when they need assistance the most.

#### **Training and Preparation**

The majority of clergy also seem to agree that there is a need to provide more training and preparation to address domestic violence for faith-based leaders. While over one-quarter (26%) agreed that the clergy

are adequately trained to address domestic violence, an overwhelming majority (74%) was either uncertain or felt that they were not prepared to address domestic violence. These findings emphasize that there needs to be more training in seminary education that focuses on domestic violence prevention and intervention. The majority of faith-based leaders are not receiving training. Faith-based domestic violence education and interventions need to be developed in an effort to educate clergy about domestic violence, help them to identify signs of abuse, and ensure that they are not only aware, but prepared to address domestic violence. Social workers can assist faith-based leaders in the design, implementation and testing of interventions. Social workers can work in collaboration with faith-based providers by co-facilitating these intervention sessions. In addition, social workers can assist in an advisory role capacity by offering suggestions regarding how to best offer the intervention to the community. While the social worker brings important knowledge, it is critical to value the knowledge that the faith-based provider brings and to ensure that there is a true spirit of collaboration.

### **More Resources Needed**

The clergy overwhelmingly agreed (98.6%) that more resources are needed to address domestic violence. They agreed that more resources are needed within the church to assist survivors and respond to perpetrators. The participants also emphasized the need for greater resources within the social service arena. It is unclear how many of the participants were aware of resources deemed insufficient or how many were simply unaware of any resources. However, the participants viewed the need for increased resources as important because when women seek supports the church must be able to respond, particularly for those that are unwilling to seek services from formal provider systems. However, it is also critical to increase and improve upon services in the formal social service arena, particularly for situations that may not be able to be handled at the informal level or if the church leader feels ill-equipped to respond.

### **Conclusion**

This paper describes African American clergy's perceptions of domestic violence awareness and engagement in domestic violence-related initiatives and practices within their churches. The limited variability

in responses seem to strongly convey that clergy recognize the need for heightened awareness and increased engagement related to domestic violence within faith communities. The findings also overwhelmingly suggest that clergy awareness of and need for resources within the Church is high. Finally, the findings point to the need for greater education and preparation for African American clergy to address domestic violence, the need for greater church involvement in responding to domestic violence, and the importance of working with churches to address domestic violence.

With such a large number of clergy perceiving that domestic violence awareness and engagement should be enhanced, there is an important role that social workers can offer to work in partnership with faith-based communities on this issue. In addition to supporting new culturally specific programs in this area, social workers can offer resources and supports to the church and congregants and can aid in educating individuals about domestic violence and how the social service system functions. Social workers can work with clergy to craft tailored, culturally competent approaches for outreach, community education, responses, and the facilitation of referrals. Social workers can also provide training on this issue for clergy, lay leaders and congregants. They can serve as a resource to responding to incidences of abuse so that the full response does not have to come from the clergy themselves. Social workers can also assist clergy by holding them accountable to be more responsive and accessible to congregants and the community around this issue. The church is a critical venue to engage when responding to domestic violence. It can aid in the healing and refuge of congregants. Preparing clergy to be knowledgeable and capable sources of support can be a powerful mechanism to addressing domestic violence. ❖

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**Kesslyn A. Brade**, Ph.D, MSW, M.Div. is an Assistant Professor of Social Work at Bowie State University, 14000 Jericho Park Road, Bowie, MD, 20715. Phone: (301) 860-3252. Email: Kbrade@bowiestate.edu.

**Tricia Bent-Goodley**, Ph.D, MSW, LICSW is Professor of Social Work and Chair of the Community, Administration and Policy Practice Sequence at the Howard University School of Social Work, 601 Howard Place, Washington, DC 20059. Phone: (202) 806-4729. Email: Tbent-goodley@howard.edu.

**Key Words:** domestic violence, African American, clergy, awareness, social work practice

# Addressing Domestic Violence: Challenges Experienced by Anglican Clergy in the Diocese of Cape Town, South Africa

*Elizabeth Petersen*

*South African women live in one of the most violent, yet most religious societies in the world. In some countries like the USA, domestic violence training programs and various resources are available to equip clergy and their faith communities. This is not yet the case in South Africa. This qualitative study is one step towards creating a more comprehensive (inclusive of the religious sector), response to domestic violence. The study aimed at exploring challenges experienced by selected clergy within the Anglican Church of the Diocese of Cape Town when dealing with domestic violence. The sample was drawn based on experience of the clergy with the phenomenon and willingness to participate. Due to the sensitive nature of the study, probing questions were followed up to get in-depth perceptions and experiences of clergy's involvement in domestic violence within their parishes. The findings confirmed the complex nature of domestic violence. Clergy defined domestic violence as an oppressive controlling behaviour. The challenges reported primarily related to the lack of training in dealing with real life issues such as domestic violence during their theological training; the lack of theological guidelines offered by the church to address patriarchal societal practices, beliefs and gender stereotyping; and the lack of guidance on contextual interpretation of Scriptures. This paper addresses components of the study that confirm the enormous opportunity for the Church to refine and re-align itself to the "Gospel Commission" and respond intentionally to humanity regarding domestic violence.*

IT IS ESTIMATED THAT ONE IN FOUR WOMEN FINDS HERSELF IN AN abusive relationship (Jewkes & Abrahams, 2002). According to Vetten (1996, cited in Matthews, Abrahams, Martin, Vetten, Van der Merwe, & Jewkes, 2004) it was estimated that every six days a woman is murdered by her intimate partner in Gauteng.<sup>1</sup> Nicole Itano (*Women's Enews*, 28 February, 2003, cited in Onyejekwe, 2004) reported that the South African police estimated that one woman is raped every 36 seconds. A national female homicide study revealed that one woman is killed by her intimate partner every six hours (Matthews et al., 2004). The issue has dominated national public debates and galvanized community-based activism and Non-Governmental Organization (NGO) intervention (Lisa Vetten, 2005b).

More than two-thirds of the South African population affiliates to the Christian faith (Stats South Africa as recorded on [www.southafrica.info/about/people/population.htm](http://www.southafrica.info/about/people/population.htm)). Bell and Mattis (2000) argue that religion must receive particular attention in any dialogue about the role and impact of domestic violence in the lives of women. They confirm that most victims are likely to use religious coping strategies and are more likely to seek help from a minister than from any other helping professional. Giesbrecht and Sevcik (2000) suggest that religion can be a positive influence in the promotion of individual, interpersonal, and social well being.

Speaking at the media launch of the centenary celebrations of the oldest shelter for abused women and children in South Africa, the Anglican Archbishop Njongonkulu Ndungane said that it was "shameful that despite Jesus calling women 'herald', 'evangelist', 'disciple' and 'apostle' and despite Jesus establishing a community of equality, the church has for 20 centuries denied and denigrated the place of women in the church" (*Cape Times*, May 10, 2004, p. 3). In this statement the Archbishop exposes the deep-rooted challenge that the church faces in its dealings with women.

Grady (2000) says that Scriptures like Ephesians 5:22 have been used by some Christians to compel Christian wives to tolerate physical and sexual abuse from their husbands in order to glorify God with submissive femininity. This he calls "spiritual abuse". He further criticizes the church for offering "illogical" and "irresponsible" counselling to women and men in domestic violence situations.

This study aimed at exploring how Anglican clergy define domestic violence, what they describe as the root causes, challenges they experi-

ence during intervention with victims and perpetrators, guidelines or lack thereof received by the church and their theological training, and, finally, how they see the Church can address the problem.

The results of this study ultimately point to the opportunity for social workers to work more closely with the Church to minister with greater compassion and insight to domestic violence help seekers and to work collaboratively towards preventative measures.

## **Research Method**

### **Sample**

For this exploratory qualitative study, a small, purposive sample of clergy was chosen, primarily because of their experience working with victims of domestic violence and their willingness to participate in the study. Clergy were chosen to represent culturally the three primary racial groups in the Western Cape.<sup>2</sup> All ten participants were selected from the Cape Town Diocese of the Anglican Church with permission from the Archbishop. The sample comprised of both male and female. The female priests included one Black, one Coloured, and two White clergy all aged between mid 40s to early 60s. The number of years in the ordained ministry ranged from 3-15 years. The male clergy included two Black, two Coloured, and two White clergy aging from late 30s to late 50s. The number of years in ordained ministry ranged from 5-23 years. All clergy had working experience as a parish priest in poor socio-economic and affluent communities and all have been exposed to congregants from the three racial groups represented in the Western Cape.

### **Research Design**

My method of inquiry was a qualitative research approach. I used face-to-face interviews utilizing a semi-structured interview guide with five open-ended themes for data collection. Questions were open-ended to allow for free flow of information. Because of the sensitive nature of the study, probing questions were followed up by responses to get in-depth perceptions and experiences of clergy's involvement in domestic violence.

## Data Analysis

I observed the following steps in data analysis as proposed by and recorded in Creswell (1998, pp. 143-144):

- I transcribed the ten interviews individually.
- I supplemented the transcription with additional data obtained from attitudes, expressions, non-verbal codes and perceptions, after the interview.
- I read through the transcripts several times. Emerging themes relating to the research questions were identified by entries in margins.
- I coded the section in themes.
- I checked the transcripts regularly to establish whether new themes emerged.
- I grouped and categorized themes by selecting specific wording, I prioritized categories into central themes and sub-themes.
- I identified narratives or quotations in the transcripts supporting the categories. I organized these narratives under each of the central and sub-themes.
- I and the coder checked whether re-coding or re-categorization was necessary. After much deliberation, we reached an agreement on themes and sub-themes.

## Findings

Following the themes of the open-ended questions, I will first describe an overview of how clergy define domestic violence. Second, I will report the clergy's insights on the root causes of domestic violence. Third, I will discuss the challenges clergy experience during intervention with victims and perpetrators. Fourth, I will review the clergy's experience of theological training and the church guidelines in assisting them to address domestic violence. Fifth, I will report the clergy's suggestions regarding training and ways that the Church can address domestic violence. I will conclude the paper with recommendations for social workers to consider as they work within the church.

### **How Clergy Defined Domestic Violence**

Clergy mainly defined domestic violence as a multifaceted oppressing and controlling abusive behaviour by men over women. In the words of some participants:

Women are at the receiving end of that violence is normally the norm and the pattern that males are the perpetrators of violence at home. (Male)

It's mostly the men that are abusing the women—their wives. (Female)

Domestic violence was also explicitly (by one participant) but also implicitly by others conceptualized as a disease of silence. Some participants said:

I think that to me I mean even within a home where people know what's going on, silence is kept...that is domestic violence. (Female)

...women become very fearful to challenge the church and they are prepared to keep quiet all the time. (Male)

While most clergy acknowledged that domestic violence happens in all types of communities; none of them reported any cases from the white, affluent communities where they had worked. One male participant said:

As far as I can remember (domestic violence) not in that community- but all I can tell is that the wives are very secretive even if they have many things they will never bring it... But to be honest nothing was ever brought to us. Things just went smooth. (Male)

Non-reporting/silence and/or not addressing the topic in a parish, was also interpreted by some clergy as “no problem exists”. One white male participant explained:

I think that in a sense this parish is not one that is in the forefront of trying to struggle with domestic violence. We are a settled parish by some standards;

we may have problems in this parish with people who already have enough, wanting more. If you go to some other parishes you may find that the issue of domestic violence just overwhelms the priest. Where as I'm not overwhelmed by it. (Male)

In summary, most of the participants were exposed to cross-cultural, varied socio-economic communities; their understandings and definitions of domestic violence were mainly framed from their limited encounters within the "coloured" and "black" poor socio-economic community experiences. They indicated that in the more affluent communities, domestic violence was not reported often because of the shame factor that is related to it and it is normally kept very private. Nason-Clark (2004, p. 2) reminds that

shame, embarrassment, guilt and fear have kept and continue to keep many women from telling anyone else what takes place within the four walls of their homes. Abused women have often blamed themselves for being poor wives or mothers. They have excused their husbands' behaviour. They have hoped or prayed for change.

The fact that in many communities the issue of domestic violence is still kept very private (Leehan, 1989; Livingston, 2002; Nason-Clark, 2004) adds to the conspiracy of silence.

### **How Clergy Understand and Explain the Root Causes of Domestic Violence**

The study revealed that root causes of domestic violence are multifaceted as clergy highlighted various issues such as patriarchal societal practices and beliefs, traditional and cultural practices, gender stereotyping and family roles, and a violent society and apartheid legacy as main reasons why domestic violence occur. For the purposes of this paper, I will briefly address some of their explanations.

Clergy spoke about patriarchal societal practices which are reflected in cultural practices and religious teachings that promote male domination and female submission. One female participant said:

...these power relations are given license by culture and religion...we have it in our own scriptures if we go straight to scripture now that we even have scriptures that says wives submit to your husbands I mean it cannot be more clear...Christianity has been patriarchal in its history but then the whole world was patriarchal in its history and Christianity is always part the world that it is in.

Another female participant explained:

Patriarchy is very evident in our society and is reinforced through culture. Most cultures, religions, I would say, all mankind religions are so in a hierarchical structure it is definitely very open to abuse of power because someone is placed in submission to someone else...

A female participant said:

it gives license for the abuse and oppression of women.  
(Female)

Giesbrecht and Sevcik (2000, p. 230) assert that culture can be understood as “encompassing the beliefs, values, world views, behavioural norms, and social role expectations that provide direction, purpose, and life-meaning among a particular group.” Mayer (2004, p. 49) explains that aspects of religious identity in South Africa are closely related to socio-cultural, historic and ethnic backgrounds. Studies have shown that most religions, including Christianity, and cultures are hierarchal in structure and nature which makes it open for abuse.

Religious teachings and interpretation of scripture and theology emerged as a contentious issue for all participants. Strong critique was directed at Saint Paul and his teachings of the role of women in the church and society. In the words of a female participant:

...I see Jesus criticizing the actual structures and systems. But Paul doesn't and I feel that he was a little confused I don't say that in disrespect because he was just a man like we are a human-beings, he was a human-being and he was in a position of transition, which really he was a Jew and then he followed Jesus

and he was also leaving some Judaism behind and moving into this new age and a new way of being and so you get things like Paul saying on the one thing I demand women to be quiet and silent in public meetings the next minute if we believe that Paul wrote, Galatians then he is saying that there is neither Jews... nor gentile men or female.

Some participants felt that because Ephesians 5:22 causes so much damage, it should not be used at all. Others explained that Scriptures must be interpreted contextually. One female participant said:

I'm certain that a lot of what is going on in the mind of the male as him being the superior being, comes from the teaching from the church and perhaps we need to revisit and undo and unlearn that and to teach the proper theology with regard to what we believe a man and a woman ought to be and how they ought to relate to one another within a relationship or within a household.

Participants were generally concerned that attitudes of traditional patriarchal gender role stereotyping were being perpetuated especially in the poor communities, while others seemed irritated that there is a change. Some participants argued that in many communities men were regarded as the head of the home and had to provide for the family. Women were required to play a submissive role, to honour her husband and never to shame him.

Some clergy argued that since this new era of women's empowerment, men have become confused and insecure in terms of what their role should be. In the words of one male participant:

It is because of the focus in the last few years on abuse of power and men abusing power and all the rest of it and the whole women's. The tremendous emphasis there has been and quite rightly so on women becoming empowered and claiming their space and not simply being a kind of doormat. I think for many men there's perhaps the uncertainty as to where men fit in. Where ....what is the image of the godly man?

Another male participant said:

Our theology is a distorted theology, we portray a very passive picture of Christianity. I don't think that it's helpful for men... We almost emasculate them. Almost remove from them the need for them to get up and do the things that men would say make us male i.e. strength and courage and initiative drive determination not that those are exclusive reserved for men, but those are things that men would see as very important. To what extent does the Christian gospel the way that it is portrayed uhmm just say those things? There's no place for them?... I look at our churches and I say where are our men? Where do our men fit in what can they contribute because a lot of the way that we portray things are very feelly feelly. It's good it's nice for women where is it for men? Do men feel comfortable here at all.

With reference to poverty and economic hardship, some clergy reasoned that men are becoming more frustrated about not being able to provide for their families. One male participant said:

Being unemployed is an incredibly disempowering experience. Your frustration builds and you end up taking it out on your family. Uhmm having a lot of anger for various things and again not knowing how to deal with it adequately.

Referring to the violent society and apartheid legacy of South Africa, some clergy spoke about the oppressive and dehumanizing manner in which black and coloured men and women were treated during the apartheid era by their white bosses. Some clergy argued that men use violence and abuse to show that they are superior and in charge. As expressed by one male participant:

...He was never acknowledged as an adult human being, he was always a boy. He was always made to feel lesser than and so maybe he need somewhere an outlet where he could demonstrate himself as something more than just a lesser human being and perhaps

the house would have been the only space that was left for him; maybe even her to be able to prove to maybe him or herself that I am more than what other people at my work especially think in terms of my humanness. So it could be a means of affirming my maleness, my superiority that I can be in charge and sometimes in many cases I would think that people go over to a level where they abuse to demonstrate their superiority to the other person.

### **Clergy's Experiences of Intervention with Victims and Perpetrators of Domestic Violence**

Pastoral counselling and sometimes recommendations to pursue legal intervention were offered to victims. Two clergy reported calling the police and supporting victims through the court procedures. Some clergy indicated that they would refer victims to a female priest or community worker in the church. One black male participant said:

... at times one would feel really bad about the profession (priesthood) itself. I'm the minister and I'm put into this situation you want to give assistance to the sad women but all I could do was to refer the sad women into the relevant professional places like FAMSA [A local family and marriage counselling non-profit organization] or social worker. I would take to the sad women to FAMSA I would take her to the social workers and the social workers could see what they can do about it.

With reference to the challenges experienced by clergy in dealing with victims, they reported many victims struggle with their own Christian beliefs about marriage and divorce. A female participant recalled:

...women say I can't leave this man cause I made promises before God and now if the church is enabling them do get out of this abusive relationship it's almost like putting God on their side and say it's ok. Because one of the other obstacles that why they don't leave, is because God will leave them too if they do the wrong thing.

Male participants acknowledged that they often felt very angry with the perpetrator to the point that they often considered becoming violent themselves. One male participant noted:

Do I have, as a man myself, a right to listen to this because it is someone of my own species who has done this to this woman? That's my first challenge. And then the second thing now something always come into my mind because honestly it makes me furious. How do I respond to this? This is not on. I cannot allow this to happen to her.

Some participants sounded really stressed, very concerned about victims, frustrated about their personal and the church's limitations in helping victims of domestic violence. A female participant said:

....Sometimes you know that this person's life is in danger and you strongly advise her, but you can never ever force somebody because they can turn around and say she told me to leave my husband. So what we try and do is show women that there is a life afterward and show them some of the steps they need to take to make that life happen. And then the practical things come in to play. The church is not equipped really for on a national base. The basis is where do I go to? Who will look after my children? Where will I find money? Cause you know money is always a problem. What is my family going to say? What happens if he finds me?—Those kind of practical questions are also very difficult to navigate around cause we don't have the structures. Here the state doesn't have them, the church doesn't have them and so those are incredible to try and assists somebody to get out of a abusive relationship.

All participants reported that they have never had a perpetrator of domestic violence approach them for help. It is normally the woman who requests pastoral home visits. One male participant said:

Certainly I'll go, but how do I address the issue that technically I don't know anything about?

Another participant said:

If you go to this individual houses of domestic violence you are exposed to something else. Then you start asking yourself 'God have you called me for these things?'

Some participants made excuses for the perpetrators. With reference to the media highlighting domestic violence and constantly showing how violent some men are, one male participant said that some husbands really depend on their wives to help them stop the abuse:

...He feels rejected because of what men outside are doing. And there's no way that he can break through that. He cannot break through that. He depends on his wife to say "that's terrible thank the Lord that you don't do that".

Another male participant noted that he felt extremely angry at the perpetrator and was tempted to hit him:

Sometimes you feel like taking part because this man is physically stronger than the women; you want to take part but you're restricted.

One black male participant explained how he supported a couple through their crisis by offering the perpetrator strong support and working closely with the police, courts and counselling agency:

What I did with this man, I took him to the police station. A case was opened. They [the police] wanted the lady to be with [at the police station]. I went back and took the lady and then I made a follow up of the case and today they're my closest friends cause I mean to leave them at the police station with the social workers and the court? That wouldn't sort the problem. But I made a follow up. I went to court and the court was also aware that there was Umfundis [a priest] involved and they started asking about the social workers...we had to deal with this as a team. He [perpetrator] went for counselling to FAMSA. He went in treatment and there was reconciliation and

there was improvement...and so we (the team) would write reports as well. We had to write reports to the Family Court. I had to write my report on the religious part of it and today they're [the couple] happy.

### **Guidelines Offered during Theological Training and/or by the Church for Clergy in Dealing with Domestic Violence Intervention**

The general consensus was that their theological training had not prepared them for dealing with domestic violence. With reference to domestic violence intervention guidelines offered by the church, there were mixed responses.

One male participant said:

... most of what we did at the college was more on the theoretical part of the other courses but it would never come to the grass-root level of the you know family life.

Another participant recalled:

I was prepared and what prepared me more was my nursing background, because I was working with domestic violence.

One coloured male participant said:

I'm trying to think but I can't remember anything. The guidelines that we have been looking for from the church were in this sexuality, homosexuality... I should think it's (domestic violence guidelines) something one acquires on an individual basis.

Another female participant said:

No, I think you have to kind of find out by yourself.

Some participants regarded the Pastoral Standards booklet [provided by the Anglican Church addressing a general code of conduct and misconduct] as the guideline. Yet the majority agreed that there was no specific guideline offered by the church to help participants deal with domestic violence.

### **Clergy's Suggestions for Domestic Violence Training and Professional Support for Clergy**

With reference to the theological teachings and scriptural interpretations which seemingly reinforce domestic violence, clergy generally agreed that the church has to revisit these. One female participant said:

Priests must address the misinterpretation of scripture as well as highlight gender inequality in the Bible.

Clergy had several suggestions regarding domestic violence education and training for themselves. They first suggested that clergy should preach about domestic violence more often from the pulpit. One participant said:

I won't pass a month in my sermons without mentioning this violence. I will always make sure that I speak about it and then I think at one stage I was saying, I must have opened a can of worms now cause lots of women are coming out in terms of them speaking to me about it.

A female participant urged:

There should also be a stronger emphasis and a scanning of it during pre-marital education. Bishops should make it compulsory for clergy and laity to attend domestic violence training.

A male participant stressed:

Prevention workshops with men as well as affirming good relationships and positive role models especially for the youth.

Another female participant said:

Use the house groups already existing in the church or create commissions to address fears and myths about gender equality and issues of power and abuse of power.

With regard to domestic violence training for clergy, participants were very specific about the content of such a course to include topics

like “the Bible and gender, the Bible and relationships” as expressed by several participants in this study. Clergy also wanted victims to come and share their experiences as part of the training. In addition, they wanted information on research findings. One male participant said:

... give indicators; explore research findings on types of homes; personality profiles of abusers; women’s responses; give social context by giving statistics; educational focus...

In terms of clarifying the role of clergy in relation to other professionals, one male participant said:

What is the role of the priest, police, social workers and at what point does the priest intervene?

Other participants added:

Address HIV and AIDS and its link to Domestic Violence. (Female)

“Practical steps that clergy should follow when dealing with domestic violence situations” must be included in such training. (Male)

Training material should also be prepared for Sunday school education purposes. (Female)

Another female participant said:

... the Bible and gender; the Bible and relationships; legal options; practical steps to intervene.

### **Discussion of Findings**

Participants mainly referred to domestic violence within the context of husband-wife marriage relationship and defined it generally as a multifaceted oppressive and controlling behaviour, as well as a disease of silence. According to Johnsson-Latham (2005, p. 42) the boundary between violence and oppression tends to be indistinct. Open violence, he says, is often relatively easy to detect as a result of the injuries it

causes. Oppression, he writes, is more difficult to define but in accordance with the United Nations Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women, he writes, it may be said to include such things as “threats, taunts, ridicule, abusive treatment, arbitrary punishment and violations of privacy, etc”.

In a multicultural society like South Africa, cultural difference between ethnic groups renders different perspectives on many issues including domestic violence. The challenge for South African activists is that not much research has been done to establish culturally competent understandings of explaining family violence. This is another opportunity for social workers to pursue. This is also an opportunity to engage the other sectors involved in addressing domestic violence as well as government. Again, lessons can be learnt from similar programs in other countries like the USA.

Literature reviewed coincides with participants' concerns relating to the silence around domestic violence and their contentions on the misinterpretation of scriptures and some problematic biblical teachings. Fortune and Enger (2005, p. 2) warn that it is either by its silence or its instruction that the church has too often communicated to battered women that they should stay in abusive relationships, try to be better wives, and “forgive and forget.” To batterers, they say, the church has communicated that their efforts to control their wives or girlfriends are justified because women are to be subject to men in all things (Ephesians 5:22-24, New International Version). Denial and silence in religious communities about wife abuse, not only immobilize religious victims, according to Nason-Clark (2004, p. 4), but inadvertently encourage the behaviour of the perpetrator.

Although literature suggests that improvement in socioeconomic resources has been a linked to interruption in perpetration of domestic violence (Aldorando & Kantor, 1997, in Drumm et al., 2003), other studies indicate that domestic violence is present across all social, economic, ethnic. and religious groups according to Berry (2000, in Drumm et al., 2003, p. 3). As evident in the way participants have reported their experiences, domestic violence is often perceived as a greater problem in poor communities. It then becomes a more complex dilemma for clergy in their attempts to minister to such individuals and families.

Consistent with findings in this study, literature reviewed stress that historical events, such as the legacy of apartheid, contribute to health and social problems, disease and suffering (Mayer, 2004; Vetten, 2000).

The colonial heritage wherein Africans were always treated coercively and violently by their colonizers is thought to have contributed to the high incidence of domestic violence on the African continent according to Bowman (2003, cited in Londt, 2004, p. 100).

Generally participants did not feel equipped, on one hand, yet on another, some felt that it was not their job to counsel, but all of them recognized the problem as serious. According to Carlo (2004, p. 3), the church must develop both short-term and long-term approaches in its attempts to promote justice. In the short-term, the safety of the victim and family members must be protected and batterers must be held genuinely accountable for their violent actions.

### **Conclusions**

This study suggests several implications for pastoral and church ministry. Participants were indeed overwhelmed, frustrated, confused, sometimes disillusioned, and almost burnt out by domestic violence help-seekers' needs. While they had a clear understanding of definitions and shared with deep thought about root causes, they struggled (various reasons) to offer a Gospel Mission based response to individuals and families. The implications for sound ministry of healing and compassion require urgent attention by the church and Christian social workers.

Literature reviewed and conclusions drawn from this study indicate that the challenge for the church goes much deeper than just offering the traditional services to victims; it also means that perpetrators will have to be held accountable and helped. It is in the absence of ministry to victims and perpetrators, as well as their children, that our families are disintegrating at an accelerated rate. No longer can we seek blame. As the church and especially Christian social workers, we are called to administer the penetrating love of Christ to humanity. It is not the help seekers who must change their approach to seek us out. We are called to be renewed in our hearts and minds as we seek God's wisdom and Jesus' compassion as we develop new programs and make our services and ministries more accessible. This provides a wonderful opportunity for Christian social workers to come alongside the church leaders to find creative ways of addressing critical concerns as highlighted in this study.

## Practice Implications

The Anglican Church has a rich history of firmly addressing social injustice in South Africa and has gained a lot of societal respect for its contribution to end apartheid. In the same way the Church is called upon to address domestic violence head-on so men, women and children across all racial, gender, and religious groups in society can live in peace and harmony. The following recommendations based on the results of this study are opportunities for Christian social workers to assist the Church:

- Social workers can facilitate the development of policies, procedures and guidelines for clergy and churches to address domestic violence. They can also develop step-by-step intervention guidelines which can be a helpful tool for clergy.
- In collaboration with experts<sup>3</sup>, theological training institutions, and senior bishops, social workers can revisit the aims and content of theological training of clergy to ensure that curricula also prepare them for real life issues such as domestic violence and other social evils. This is a crucial part of the formation of the church leadership, and it shapes the future of the church and family life. Social workers can play a very important role in bringing together the relevant stakeholders and facilitate the dialogue.
- Social workers can also assist congregations by conducting needs assessments, as well as identifying existing structures and how these structures can be utilized to address domestic violence. Within certain denominations (especially in the USA), some work has been done. Social workers can offer evaluation/assessment of those services and programs with the intention of improving quality of ministry to individuals and families affected by domestic violence.
- In collaboration with those responsible for training and development of clergy, the social worker can help develop a training curriculum to be incorporated into clergy's theological training as well as their ongoing professional development.
- Social workers can help broaden the scope of the current violence against women task team and establish a gender desk which will help address all the related issues and in-

form the church of critical theological and practical issues to address. Such a gender desk should also be appropriately funded to extend its initiatives beyond the borders of the Western Cape.

- The church must build into its structures debriefing and self-care services to support clergy as they are working with domestic violence issues. This is a critical role for Christian social workers who understand the importance of caring for the caregivers. Social workers can train lay counsellors or designated persons in the church to facilitate regular support groups for clergy.
- As with the HIV/AIDS programme, all churches should be trained by the Church to offer education and support to families who experience domestic violence. Again, social workers can ensure that such services are implemented by the church and offer professional guidance and possibly supervision.
- Social workers can conduct more comprehensive research on the issue, using a combination of qualitative and quantitative research methods to be able to generalize the findings. Such research can inform the important collaboration between social workers and the church in their quest to minister healing and wholeness to humanity.

In conclusion, it must be said that the challenges for the Christian Church are enormous when it comes to honestly addressing domestic violence. It requires careful and diligent reflection on theologies, teachings, and interpretation of Scripture which have reinforced the violation of the image of God in countless women, children, and men directly affected by domestic violence. The Church is constantly called to recommit to compassionate social justice ministry of Christ in the Gospels. Social workers have a responsibility to step into their profession especially within the church to help advance this ministry and bring healing and hope to individuals and families affected by domestic violence. ❖

#### ENDNOTES

1. A province/state in South Africa.
2. Under the Apartheid regime in South Africa the population were classified in 4 categories: "whites" refer to people from European decent,

“Blacks” refer to people from the ethnic groupings, “Coloureds” referred to people from mixed racial decent and “Indians” referred to people from Malaysian decent. The predominant groups in the Western Cape are Blacks, Coloureds and Whites.

3. Such as the FaithTrust Institute (based in Seattle) which is the pioneer in addressing the faith issues as it pertains to domestic and sexual violence. Since the 1970s they have developed resource materials in collaboration with various churches to address this issue with religious/faith integrity.

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**Elizabeth Petersen**, Degree of Master Artium in Social Work, Department of Social Work, Faculty of Community and Health Sciences, University of the Western Cape, South Africa, P.O. Box 13077 Woodstock 7915, Cape Town, South Africa. Phone: +27 +82 4755116. Email: [elizabethpetersen1@gmail.com](mailto:elizabethpetersen1@gmail.com).

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**Key Words:** domestic violence, violence against women, Christianity, Patriarchy, theology, teachings, scripture, clergy, victim, perpetrator, intervention

# The RAVE Website: A Demonstration Project for the Innovative Delivery of Domestic Violence Training and Resources

*Barbara Fisher-Townsend, Cathy Holtmann, and Steve McMullin*

*Christian social workers and religious communities are important components of a coordinated community response to domestic violence, since so many people of faith look to those with a faith perspective when seeking help. This article describes a clearinghouse website designed to facilitate such a coordinated response. The RAVE (Religion and Violence e-Learning) Project seeks to equip people of faith to respond to domestic violence in ways that are compassionate, practical and informed by the latest research and best practices by professionals; to build bridges between religious and secular services; to walk alongside victims and survivors; to work with youth in developing the skills for healthy relationships; and to hold abusers accountable.*

**T**HE MURIEL MCQUEEN FERGUSSON CENTRE FOR FAMILY VIOLENCE Research at the University of New Brunswick in eastern Canada was founded in 1992 as a collaborative social activist/academic institute examining issues of family violence (Stirling, Cameron, Nason-Clark, & Miedema, 2004). One of the five original research teams at the Centre was devoted to understanding domestic violence in Christian churches (Nason-Clark, 1997).

Early research by this team, working among a variety of faith traditions in Atlantic Canada, included mailed questionnaires and per-

sonal in-depth interviews with clergy, focus groups of church women, telephone surveys of shelter workers and religious leaders, and community consultations (Beaman-Hall & Nason-Clark, 1997; Beaman & Nason-Clark, 1999; Nason-Clark, 1995, 1996, 1999, 2000, 2001; Nason-Clark & Fisher-Townsend, 2005). Later research has involved closed case file analysis of faith-based batterer intervention programs, interviews with criminal justice, advocacy, and therapeutic professionals, and on-going interviews with men who have been court mandated to attend batterer intervention—many of whom have served time in prison (Fisher-Townsend, Nason-Clark, Ruff, & Murphy, 2008; Nason-Clark, 2007a, 2007b; Nason-Clark & Fisher-Townsend, 2005; Nason-Clark, Murphy, Fisher-Townsend, & Ruff, 2004).

Early collaborative efforts resulted in several books utilizing our emerging sociological data combined with religious voices for change (Kroeger & Nason-Clark, 2001; Nason-Clark & Kroeger, 2004). In response to these books, invitations to speak to clergy and to seminary students, as well as a variety of religious audiences, about the many issues around religion and domestic violence, began to increase. It was at this point that the concept of the RAVE (Religion and Violence e-Learning) Project was developed. This initiative envisioned utilizing emerging e-learning technology to incorporate 20 years of research data, as well as the needs of religious leaders and the advocacy community, and to focus on the primacy of the journey of a religious woman seeking refuge in the aftermath of violence at home. Funding was sought and obtained from The Lilly Foundation in 2005, and, following extensive preparation, the site was launched in September 2007.

The purpose of the RAVE website is to provide an effective online training venue for religious leaders, and indeed for all those working to assist people impacted by family violence, to become familiar with data about domestic violence, to understand what domestic violence is and how it affects victims and families, and to help them learn how to respond effectively and appropriately, especially in times of crisis. The data shows that many victims are most likely to go first to their pastor for help (Nason-Clark 2000); therefore, it is imperative that religious leaders know how to respond.

Given the delicacy of the topic, the fact that religious leaders have busy schedules and the imperative of safety for religious victims, our research team felt the best way to meet all of these needs was through the provision of on-line resources. Christian social workers can be

quite helpful to any coordinated approach to domestic violence and the RAVE site aims to provide them with a plethora of faith-based resources relevant to their work. The information and resources on the RAVE website are the result of many years of academically directed, data-based social science research, made available in ways that are both practical and accessible to the community, representing a variety of faith traditions and perspectives.

The RAVE Project is also a response to a perceived need to reach out to women of faith who suffer from domestic violence, both for those whose faith communities have failed to offer support and for those who have experienced a lack of regard for their beliefs when they have accessed secular services. In listening to the experiences of Christian women, we have found that often they do not easily or readily identify themselves as abused or battered. Their worldview and self-understanding are highly influenced by their faith context. For Christian social workers, the site offers a wealth of resources and information they might utilize in their work with families of faith who have been impacted by abuse.

### **Resources for Religious Leaders and Christian Social Workers**

The website provides a range of voices, including criminal justice workers, survivors, therapists, advocates, academics, and religious leaders. For pastors from both mainline and evangelical congregations, the site offers sermon materials and other congregational materials that will fit in their tradition. Reading the words of a survivor who talks about how her faith was impacted by domestic violence and about how her congregation responded, or what she wished they had done, can be a powerful way for pastors to recognize the importance of responding appropriately when confronted with family violence. For religious leaders who are reluctant to acknowledge the likelihood of abusive family relationships within a congregation, and for pastors who are fearful of addressing domestic violence among church members, reading data-based evidence can help them see past that shame and fear that often makes it emotionally difficult to respond. Becoming familiar with the available resources in the community may be the first step toward building relationships between those with a faith-based approach and secular agencies and advocates.

Religious leaders and Christian social workers are faced with many demands in the course of their daily work, which may limit the time

they can dedicate to training opportunities. Therefore instruction is provided in 15-minute segments. In many cases, audio segments can be saved as podcasts to be listened to in the car or when walking.

Since many religious leaders have no experience in responding to abuse, the online training includes a variety of case studies (the “Mending Broken Hearts” series) where pastors can read the actual stories of victims who sought help from their pastor. By reading the perspectives provided by both the pastor and the victim, religious leaders and social workers can consider how they might respond to a similar situation. Once they have reviewed the case study, they can peruse comments by a variety of experienced individuals who have read the same scenario, including survivors, police officers, therapists, advocates, and religious leaders. In a similar way, the website includes “Stories of Hope and Inspiration,” actual case studies based on interviews by members of the RAVE team with convicted perpetrators who have been enrolled in a faith-based program for batterers.

The RAVE website also provides a number of video resources, including a series of clips that can be used in a variety of congregational and therapeutic contexts—as sermon illustrations, at youth groups or adult study groups, and as training materials for volunteer leaders. By offering video resources narrated by survivors, theologians, advocates, and academics, the website provides the support pastors need to demonstrate to their congregations the importance of the issue within the faith community. The use of these resources may also enhance a religious leader’s ability to address domestic violence, so that victims or perpetrators of violence in the congregation do not think that “the pastor is talking about me”—an important consideration, especially in small congregations. These video clips offer Christian social workers useful resources for training and education, as well as therapeutic intervention.

Research data indicates that most religious leaders have never visited a local women’s shelter or transition house, and often have not met and do not know any of the staff (Beaman-Hall & Nason-Clark, 1997). Since it is crucial that victims who are in danger be directed to a place of safety, the website provides contact information for every woman’s shelter in North America. One of the most useful sections of our website in this regard is the Help Now section. Under that tab not only are there shelter maps, which list the shelters available in cities and towns throughout North America and their contact information, but there are also maps with listings of every provincial and state domestic violence coalition. Additionally,

there are hotline numbers for a variety of important United States national contacts. With three clicks on the computer, a pastor can put a victim of violence in contact with a shelter. That is helpful not only for finding shelters in one's own community, but also for referrals, when members of a congregation require help for family members (daughters, sisters, mothers) in need for shelter in a different town or community. By going to the RAVE website, one can quickly provide the necessary information about where to find help and refuge. This "Help Now" section is also a useful resource for Christian social workers who wish to find shelter contact information or state domestic violence coalition resources. We have just launched a North American map of "religious resources" with listings of Christian counsellors, safe haven agencies and churches, community agencies that offer a faith perspective, and faith leaders and faith-based agencies engaged in the work of domestic violence. For Christian social workers wishing to refer clients to religious resources within their own communities, this will be a tremendous help.

### **Resources for Victims/Survivors**

In addition to providing resources to meet the needs of clergy and advocates, the site ensures that victim/survivors have access to an abundance of resources that offer comfort, support and information. One of the ways the RAVE project helps Christian women recognize the signs of family violence is through different modes of telling the stories of abuse. Victims/survivors who visit the site can click through the "Stained Glass Story of Abuse." The motif of stained glass used throughout the RAVE site is a constant reminder that the spiritual resources of the victim's religious tradition can help her overcome her own unique experience of trauma and violence. This stained glass approach to domestic violence may be especially useful for Christian social workers who work with victim/survivors with a faith perspective, since it provides a vivid symbolic representation of the impact and consequences of abuse using a religiously related image.

Another mode of story telling utilized by the RAVE web site is the use of women's talking circles. Located in the Women's Resources section of the site, a victim can listen to a variety of voices retelling snippets of women's stories of abuse, collected through interviews with survivors. One voice says, "It was a very conscious decision on my part to tiptoe [around him]. I was living on eggshells all the time...in my marriage, I

was dying bit by bit...it was slowly destroying me....” And another one recalls, “I never told anyone...I never told anyone anything...I didn’t dare tell anyone; there goes my job, you see my security. He, he made good money.” This feature enables women to experience a form of virtual community with others who have suffered and have sought help.

Once a woman is able to name the abuse that is destroying her and shattering her dreams of family life, she may need assistance in deciding what to do next. Many women have told us that they do not necessarily want their marriages to end, but they want the abuse to stop (Nason-Clark & Fisher-Townsend 2005). The RAVE web site can aid a woman in making this happen. The website features a detailed safety plan that can be downloaded and personalized for any situation. It helps victims think about safety in their homes and in public, as well as outlining the steps necessary for getting a restraining order if necessary. Used in conjunction with the information provided on the shelter maps, these resources can help women put an end to abuse, and may also help to save lives.

Through the use of talking circles, we also recount stories gathered in focus groups of how church women have reached out informally to the abused in their midst. One woman shared, “I guess I can think of another situation where a husband was threatening an assault on his wife and she spent the night in our home. And I guess we helped separate them maybe.” Even though small acts like offering a bed, looking after children, or helping get a car repaired can seem insignificant, they exemplify a Christian response to those in situations of abuse. Our Women’s Resources section also provides examples of how church women’s groups can plan support groups for women at risk in their communities or work to help sustain their local transition house.

### **The Need for Partnerships to End Abuse**

Christian churches have been slow to respond to the problem of domestic violence in families of faith (Ammons 1999). While many denominations and church leaders have denounced violence against women in formal pastoral statements, few have developed detailed plans of action or resources for responding to the problem of family violence in local churches. As a result, not every church is a safe place for a woman to disclose her experiences of abuse. There remains a gap between the emerging theological sensitivity of the experiences of women and church action towards making Christian families non-vio-

lent and free from abuse. A helpful faith-community response should involve not only a clear recognition of the illegality and inhumanity of spousal abuse but also a re-evaluation of traditions and a challenge to the ideological assumptions that support violence against women within the belief structures of their communities.

When dealing with the complex and difficult issue of domestic violence, partnerships between the realms of the sacred and the secular are important and must indeed be nourished. To that end, we have worked diligently to ensure that our web-based resources and training are accessible and useful for those working from a secular perspective, in addition to those with a faith-based perspective.

In speaking with many social workers, shelter workers, community advocates, legal advocates, and probation and parole officers across North America, we have noticed a common theme—secular practitioners do not want to deal with people's faith because they are not equipped with the necessary information and resources to meet those needs. On the homepage of the site, we offer words of hope and awakening from a number of secular professionals working in the field of domestic violence. Those words deliver a sense of understanding, of community, of strength in numbers, and, importantly, they offer small glimpses of hope that are so necessary to keep on going, to keep doing the work, to keep facing perceived failures. Also on that page is a link to the Stained Glass Story of Abuse—a great visual tool to help those with a secular perspective to understand the impact of abuse within a family of faith.

There is a link, both on the homepage and under the Resources tab, for "Community Resources." Here we offer a variety of ideas for consideration in the context of community-based intervention. For example, there are sections on the benefits of bringing clergy members to the collaborative table when dealing with domestic violence; research-based "did you know" information about clergy involvement and knowledge; and how domestic violence leaders and victim advocates seek to replenish their energy to keep working toward effecting change. We also offer downloadable print resources that may be provided to clients who are seeking faith-based information or utilized for reference when required. These include six pages from our website and six brochures, including "Transition House Workers," and "Working with Churches."

As part of our effort to incorporate a variety of perspectives in our work, we offer a series of FAQs, such as "Are there warning signs in a relationship?" that are answered by the RAVE team and by those working

in the field. Each of the ten initial questions has answers from a variety of respondents—including survivors, advocates, therapists, shelter workers, theologians, researchers, criminal justice professionals and pastors.

In keeping with our focus on collaborative work, within the On-Line Training resources we offer a section titled “Building Bridges.” Here we provide seven lessons on making links between community agencies and faith communities. Each of these lessons is designed to be completed within fifteen minutes. There is also a section of “Fast Facts” that provides research-based bulleted facts regarding a variety of topics that would be useful for incorporating in presentations or reports.

### **Conclusion**

Our experience in demonstrating the RAVE website with professionals in religious and community groups over the past three years has confirmed for us the necessity of providing accessible faith-based resources for those working with religious victims of domestic violence. Social workers can access these resources in order to respond to the spiritual aspects of the journey towards healing and wholeness for survivors. They can feel more confident in helping victims work through spiritual questions that arise in the aftermath of violence, as well as suggest alternative religious interpretations of fundamental Christian concepts that can help both survivors and perpetrators work toward abuse-free relationships. Most importantly, social workers can use the website as the basis for a coordinated community response to domestic violence that includes both secular and faith-based services.

The RAVE website is regularly updated with additional resources that we believe will assist clergy and faith community members, victims/survivors, social workers, and community advocates. A feedback form is provided on our homepage for users to comment on our materials and offer suggestions for additions and improvements. Since the official launch of [www.theraveproject.org](http://www.theraveproject.org) in September 2007, the site has received visitors from every U.S. state and Canadian province, as well as more than 40 countries around the world. We believe it serves as an important tool for “building bridges” due to the multi-disciplinary perspectives, both faith-based and secular, available throughout the site. ❖

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**Barbara Fisher-Townsend**, Ph.D., Postdoctoral Fellow, The RAVE Project, 2 Garland Court, Rm 205, University of New Brunswick, Fredericton, NB, Canada E3B 6C2. Phone: (506) 451-6978. Email: [fisher.townsend@unb.ca](mailto:fisher.townsend@unb.ca).

**Cathy Holtmann**, M.Div., M.A., Graduate Research Assistant, The RAVE Project, 2 Garland Court, Rm 205, University of New Brunswick, Fredericton, NB, Canada E3B 6C2. Phone: (506) 458-7283. Email: [cathy.holtmann@unb.ca](mailto:cathy.holtmann@unb.ca).

**Steve McMullin**, MATS, Graduate Research Assistant, The RAVE Project, 2 Garland Court, Rm 205, University of New Brunswick, Fredericton, NB, Canada E3B 6C2. Phone: (506) 458-7283. Email: [steve.mcmullin@unb.ca](mailto:steve.mcmullin@unb.ca).

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# Set Free Ministries: A Comprehensive Model for Domestic Violence Congregational Interventions

*Thay Danielson , Pat Lucas, Rose Malinowski, and Sharon Pittman*

*Since 2003 the Moody Church in Chicago has strategically implemented a comprehensive model for congregational ministry to meet the needs of over 250 women experiencing family violence. This paper outlines the four-phase process used in developing the Set Free Ministries, a comprehensive faith-centered domestic violence program situated in a large urban congregation. Additionally, the authors describe the variety of interventions used, as well as the breakthroughs and challenges that women and families face when struggling with all types of abuse and violence. The paper closes with an outcome testimony exemplifying the struggles women encounter when confronting family violence.*

**A**S WRITTEN IN ROMANS 12:15 (NIV), “REJOICE WITH THOSE WHO rejoice; mourn with those who mourn,” congregations experience a sense of community and family while living out the essence of discipleship Scripture teaches day by day. In Christ we rejoice with each other in the celebrations of marriages and new births. We mourn when loss in the family occurs. Congregations also have the opportunity to be intentional and engaged when encountering the pain of family violence within the body. Often it is easy to view family violence as a personal or private issue rather than a congregational responsibility (Kimball, 2002; Levitt, & Ware, 2006; Nason-Clark & Clark Kroeger, 2004). But abuse negatively impacts all social systems—the abused, the abusers, the children, the extended family, the congregation, and the

surrounding community, so our interventions as Christians and social workers must address all of these.

A number of studies have explored the relationship between religious involvement and incidents of family violence (Christman, 2008). Still other studies document problems likely associated with congregational culture and levels of family violence (Gall, 2005). For example, Ellison and Anderson (2001) conducted a quantitative study to explore links between religion and family violence. They suggest that regular church-attendance may be associated with a diminished risk for perpetrating family abuse among men who attended church weekly and women who attend monthly.

More recently, Christman (2008) found that church members of an evangelical church reported having been abused through any form of interpersonal violence at a prevalence rate of 74% for females and 69% for males. Additionally she suggests in her study findings that a slight religious protective barrier appears as the more one attends church the incidence of interpersonal violence decreases. Also an inverse relationship with conservatism and seeking professional resources was found.

This study built on the original research of Drumm, McBride, Hopkins, Thayer, Popescu, & Wrenn, (2006) who suggested that the predominate type of abuse reported in a sample of conservative church members (N=1431) was that of control and demeaning behavior (68%). Respondents (47%) also reported experiencing common couple violence and 29% had experienced sexual violence. Most disturbingly, 10% suffered from extensive physical violence leaving permanent physical and emotional damage.

Statistics only tell part of the tragic story of family violence in the church. Congregations can become part of the solution. Addressing violence within our communities of faith is not solely an individual issue. Violence affects women, men, children, and the entire body of Christ.

It is the challenge of the church to decide to be a protective or an additional risk factor in the lives of those experiencing violence. Maintaining the secret protects the abuser, follows a code of silence, creates isolation of the victim, and promotes continuation of the cycle of abuse. Confidentiality protects the abused, follows a code of ethical standards, and aims for a community that supports survivors.

This paper describes one congregation that has stepped out boldly to confront domestic violence. Since 2003, the Moody Church in Chicago has strategically implemented a comprehensive model of congregational ministry to meet the needs of their hurting victims of violence.

This paper outlines the four-phase process used in developing the Set Free Ministries, a comprehensive domestic violence program situated in a large urban congregation. Additionally, the authors describe the variety of interventions and the breakthroughs and challenges that women and families face when struggling with domestic violence in their community of faith. The paper closes with a testimony exemplifying the struggles women encounter when confronting family violence.

### **Program Model**

This model ministry was designed and developed using a critical four phase approach. These four phases were not designed as a rigid and linear process. These included: Phase 1: Accept the Call; Phase 2: Engage in Intercessory Prayer; Phase 3: Develop the Program Proposal; and Phase 4: Faith-centered Implementation.

#### **Phase 1: Accept the Call**

As Christian social workers, the values of love, justice, and kindness propel our work and inform the vision the Lord daily sets in our servant hearts as He calls us to work (Hugen, 2003). During 2003 the Lord prepared the soil for Set Free Ministries in the hearts of four women attending Moody Church in Chicago, Illinois. Within a period of a few months, the Lord planted the seed in these women to address violence from two different perspectives: Family violence within the congregation and women survivors of childhood abuse. In 2004, these needs were presented to the Women's Ministry team for their input. The Director of Women's Ministry heard this call and responded by encouraging these four visionary women to put their plan into action.

#### **Phase 2: Engage in Intercessory Prayer**

With only three months to design this new ministry, the women set aside time to seek for God's direction. The hallmark of this ministry is rooted in God's calling, therefore concerted prayer effort at the start and throughout program implementation was vital. As Davis (1983) writes, "Christian social ministry consists of "activities carried out by redeemed individuals called by God to proclaim the good news, to minister to the needy, and to seek justice for all" (p. 523) Within this prayer-centered

Phase 2, in response to God's call, God's direction and protection in the lives of these four was sought along with safety and discernment in the lives of other women who were victims of violence.

### **Phase 3: Develop the Program Proposal**

During this prayer-grounded start-up, two months were spent researching and formulating a model and comprehensive program plan. As goals, objectives, and action steps were developed, God's direction was continually sought.

Researching the literature and meetings with both faith-based and secular programs locally and nationally helped define essential areas of service. Church-based programs such as Willow Creek Church, Focus Ministries, PASCH (Peace and Safety in Christian Homes), and Calvary Memorial Church in Oak Park, Illinois, provided background information on Christian faith approaches to family violence, support groups, and pastoral training materials. Agencies such as the YWCA in Evanston, IL, generously provided input into safety practices for service providers and women currently in abusive situations. In addition, we found many valuable programmatic resources in the literature (See Additional Christian Resources List).

This background research informed significant issues for program development: confidentiality, adoption of safety measures, creating congregational awareness, liability, and internal communication. The majority of the help-seeking female victims in our congregation did not want to exclude their husbands as they participated in the abuse recovery program. Our program calls for a careful balance of ensuring safety while assessing the dynamics and vulnerability of each family unit. Kernsmith (2005) outlines the critical need for holistic family interventions. While our proposal and eventual program delivery is primarily directed to educate the mother as to the effects of family violence and make necessary referrals to partners in the community for children in order to be in a safe place to be heard and believed, we do also explore Biblically-based treatment options for male perpetrators as we assess the family system. An additional goal is to provide early intervention to prevent the passing on of violent behavior to the next generation.

#### **Phase 4: Faith-centered Implementation**

As the program proposal was finalized, we realized that the scriptural motivation and inspiration naturally framed the name of our outreach, “Set Free Ministries,” which comes from John 8:32, “And you will know the truth and the truth will **Set** you **Free**.” The guiding statement of Set Free Ministries is that healing occurs through the power of prayer, the Bible, the support of the Christian community, and the connection to capable community resources.

Hence, with much prayer and preparation, Set Free Ministries was blessed to begin services and implement the mission. Program implementation details a three-pronged response within the church community to prevent, identify, and heal abuse through prayer and provide other direct services.

#### ***Prevention***

Primary prevention activities are those that take place before the violence occurs (Schewe, 2002). From our view, prevention occurs as a church body educates the congregation about the components of healthy relationships and the dynamics of abuse. During our program design phase, research informed us about different perspectives on educational approaches to domestic violence. We outlined a training agenda for the pastoral staff, lay leadership, and general congregation before implementing program services. We implemented instruction for families and pastors to help develop healthy Biblical identities and supportive relationships. Focus Ministries provided the training for the pastoral staff. Educational content was provided on the identification of abuse and the formulation of a response to a disclosure of abuse. Pastors and church leaders who may be mentors or prayer partners with women who disclose abuse were taught how to respond effectively and thus reinforce the culture of the church as a sanctuary and model of our faith community as a key place for spiritual and social healing.

Educational information about domestic violence was also dispersed throughout the church body. Women in the congregation were provided education with:

- A special issue of the quarterly Women Ministry’s newsletter devoted to domestic violence;
- A theatrical presentation of readings focused on themes of domestic violence;

- A women's luncheon that highlighted education and a testimony related to domestic violence;
- And training of the Women's Ministry membership and church-wide prayer partners on identification and response to domestic violence.

All of these trainings included testimonies of struggles with childhood abuse and domestic violence from women within the church body.

The final step was to make an official announcement of Set Free Ministries to the whole church body as part of a seven-part sermon series on "Reclaiming the Family." The general congregation learned about the dynamics of domestic violence through the mechanism of a sermon series as well as participation in any of the church education opportunities described above. It is the hope that prevention activities such as these will contribute to reducing risk factors and increasing protective factors within the congregation.

### ***Prayer***

Prayer forms a basis for all the program activities of Set Free Ministries. Through each new development, the ministry leadership is actively praying and incorporating periods of fasting for discernment. As detailed in the program model, we include prayer as a vital support and directive. If a woman is interested, we connect her to a consistent prayer partner that has received appropriate training in domestic violence. Additional spiritual resources include devotionals developed by program leaders and participants. For example, one talented member in our support recovery group wrote over fifty devotionals from the Psalms that we routinely send to women on our e-mail list. Though not all women served through our ministry are professing believers, prayer support is sought by many women from varying backgrounds.

### ***Direct Services***

The direct services offered in Set Free Ministries are the hotline crisis response, risk assessment, physical safety planning, spiritual and emotional safety planning, women's recovery support group, prevention and follow-up programming, individual counseling sessions, and court support.

***Hotline Crisis Response:*** To ensure the best possible professionalism and confidentiality, we obtained a cell phone as the main contact number. This cell phone is shared by leaders in the ministry and also provides a direct contact to ensure a confidential and timely response. This hotline

crisis response number for Set Free Ministries is consistently listed in the weekly church bulletin along with other ministry groups.

**Risk Assessment:** During the assessment process we explore supports and risks for the women seeking help and for their families. Some of the questions we raise during the risk assessment look at if there is a specific plan directed towards the victim and if there is a means for follow through by the abuser. We ask if weapons are present in the home such as guns and knives. We also explore Biblically-based treatment options for male perpetrators as well in order to know how to refer internally or externally. Among the risk assessment issues addressed are: What support do men/women need to be accountable and responsible for their actions; how can the faith community more effectively encourage men to live as supportive healthy leaders in their home; and of critical importance, how does the church address the damage done to the children who are victims of family physical or emotional abuse?

**Physical Safety Planning:** Safety planning is essential to all the services we provide, including initial screening and on-going during intervention. The majority of women are at a greater risk of being murdered when they leave as compared to staying in the abusive relationship (Campbell et al., 2003), thus safety planning is a crucial element to weave throughout all program efforts.

As you plan safety steps with victims, identify ways for the woman to quickly exit a volatile situation. Encourage her to make a checklist of important documents and personal items that she may need. As you ask her these questions, also reflectively listen to her. Listen to the specifics and listen to her emotions. She is the one that has to live with her decisions, whether it is to stay or separate from this relationship. Any threat of harm needs to be taken seriously even if the abused woman does not perceive the threat to her safety. Too many cases have occurred where the first follow through of physical harm after years of verbal intimidation resulted in murder. Sadly, one woman who had been invited by a member of the support group to participate in this ministry did not join but was murdered by her husband when leaving the relationship. In addition, one woman during group vocalized fear of returning home that night. By asking clear questions, we learned that there were firearms in the home and created a safety plan for her.

**Spiritual and Emotional Safety Planning:** Just as we are concerned about physical harm and death, we are also concerned about the emotional and spiritual “murders” that occur daily within the lives of the women in

our congregations. Emotions linked to abuse are numbness, anger, grief, depression, guilt, and shame (Tracy, 2005). We find that many of our violated women are struggling through a lifestyle of shame. In meeting with these burdened women it is important to sort out the unhealthy shame messages in their lives that have produced isolation, rage, depression, addiction, sabotaged intimacy, and feelings of worthlessness. Many of these women carry the projected shame from their abuser.

**Women's Recovery Support Group:** The central tenet of the support group intervention is to, first and foremost, direct women who are struggling from current or past abusive relationships to find strength, coping resiliency, and ultimate hope in Jesus Christ. The ministry support group meets twice a month. The meetings involve a time of fellowship, devotions, recovery and support education; they end in prayer. This group is an open group that meets year round and the educational topics rotate. All women are welcome to attend, whether they are members of The Moody Church or not.

Open enrollment of the group serves as a way to encourage women to seek support on an as needed basis rather than have women in crisis told they have to wait two months until a new group begins. Also, we have found that a woman may have difficulty attending every session, especially if her partner discourages her from leaving the home. The meetings and the materials provided at the meetings are free of cost to program participants. This practice encourages attendance for those with limited finances or in situations where finances are controlled by the abuser.

To safeguard the privacy of the women and minimize the risk of disclosure to the abuser, the meeting location is communicated directly only to the support group participant. The church bulletin highlights the ministry with a simple statement of contacting Set Free Ministries through the hotline number "if you or someone you know is experiencing abuse." This approach also respects the confidentiality of the meeting location from other church members. Additionally, word of mouth seems to have been one of the most effective marketing tools for this intervention. Women attending the support group bring other victims of abuse with them. To date, we have not set a limit as to how many women can attend. At times over twenty women joined us but on average ten women come to the biweekly meetings.

Women who attend the group are diverse in age, race, economic status, educational background, living circumstances, and even faith. The ground rule of the group is respect. We respect the time so that

all can be given a chance to share. We respect what is shared. The group acts as a sounding board in listening and discussing, respecting a women's right to self-determination. Finally, we request that each woman respect the confidentiality and privacy of the other women in attendance outside of group sessions.

Our curricular approach for the support group involves presenting three key educational topics for the support group: *Boundaries, Responding to Verbal and Emotional Abuse*, and *Love, Anger, and Forgiveness*.

We have adapted and updated the first topic, *Boundaries*, from ideas outlined by Cloud and Townsend (1992). This approach explores individual value and worth in the sight of God and helps increase understanding of how to set healthy limits and ownership in one's life. We reference a variety of scripture while studying boundaries that highlight reaping what one sows, but also challenge living out the love and truth that has been given from God.

The second topic, *Responding to Verbal and Emotional Abuse*, was adapted from the *Support Group Leader's Guide* of Focus Ministries (2004), coupled with a study of the book of James. Each session in this second curriculum presentation highlights a form of abuse: withholding, isolation, discounting, ridiculing, blaming, manipulating, accusing, criticizing, trivializing, threatening, insulting, forgetting, ordering, denial, and abusive anger. Concurrent study of the book of James as developed by the group facilitators helps women explore the themes of sin, the power of the tongue, the character of God, and the role of faith in helping promote healing and safe relationships.

The third topic of *Love, Anger, and Forgiveness* is accomplished through study of the book of Ruth. The group facilitators developed this material specifically for this ministry. This Bible study explores family of origin issues, grief and loss, the role of anger, and recovery from trauma and pain. As part of this study, a timeline is developed by the group for the lives of Naomi and Ruth and the women also draw timelines for themselves identifying significant milestones and emotions connected to the life events demonstrated in this Bible story.

Beyond the learning outcomes, the group dynamics themselves offer vital social support for enhancing resiliency. The hope and trust shared among the women is outstanding testament to thriving beyond pain. The opportunities of corporate mourning in the group sessions have facilitated the miracle of corporate healing. Healing experienced in a woman's life flows into healing with children, extended family,

friends, and even marriage. Our hope is that through the experience of a healthy and supportive community these victims receive the support and nurturance for which they have longed. No longer can the sin of violence separate them from experiencing a safe and caring Christian community. In our Set Free Ministries, we have witnessed the transformation of women and their families as they recover and mature in their walk with the Lord.

***Prevention and Follow-up Programming:*** For about two years, Set Free Ministries provided a special support group for mothers who wanted to break the generational cycle of abuse and feared their own anger in parenting. Initially the Mom's Group unanimously asked for help with self-care as moms encounter the daily stresses of parenting. The sessions provided discussed issues of self-care such as healthy outlets to relieve stress, processing anger, diet and nutrition, journaling, priority setting, and maintaining time for devotions. For a year the Mom's Group held quarterly cooking classes addressing the issues of healthy nutritional habits. Women came together to learn how to cook healthfully and were able to bring home the food. This helped with both finances and time in preparing meals for their families. As church-wide parenting groups developed, we connected mothers to this resource and ended the Mom's Group through Set Free Ministries.

***Individual Counseling Sessions:*** Individual sessions also complement the intervention of the ministry support groups. The practice model that has been developed for counseling these women typically involves two women meeting with the individual in need. Our rationale for this approach is for the woman to feel supported by a community and to also relieve the stress of one individual being the primary source of assistance. Thus far the co-directors of Set Free Ministries have provided the counseling services to the women free of charge.

We most frequently utilize brief treatment, typically lasting five sessions with a problem solving model (Benner, 2003). Our focus is to provide support, act as a sounding board, and connect to more extensive resources as needed. The first session is an explanation of Set Free Ministries and what services we can and cannot provide. If the woman is a parent we will discuss mandated reporting of child abuse. As the woman then shares her presenting problem, our assessment questions are open-ended and they transition to more specific questions in mutually formulating goals. Follow-up sessions typically occur sooner if there is an urgent need for safety planning. Other options include bi-monthly or

monthly scheduling of sessions with suggested homework as appropriate. We proactively attempt to connect woman in need to vital resources. We also encourage her in her walk with God as she seeks safety for herself and her family and moves toward a path of healing. Operating from a client-led and client-focused perspective we include spiritual aspects as an important part of the intervention process (Sherwood, 2008).

Our individual sessions incorporate the use of a variety of clinical tools. Among the most common that we use are eco-maps, spiritual assessments, the life map, timelines, genograms, narrative therapy using journaling, and use of prayer and scripture study. Among our most effective treatment tools are active listening and empathy. It is powerful for these women to feel heard and believed as they recover and develop spiritual maturity. The on-going support after these sessions is provided either through connection to a prayer partner, a mentor, bible study, the support group, or referral to local community resources such as counselors or attorneys.

***Social Support at Court Hearings:*** Court can be an intimidating time in presenting requests to a judge in front of the abuser. There may be fears of repercussion from the abuser in seeking assistance in the judicial system or frustration in witnessing the abuser deny or even charm the participants in the legal system. Throughout the process emotional and prayer support is provided during hearings for orders of protection, custody, or divorce hearings.

### **Testimony**

Mary (name changed to ensure confidentiality) learned about Set Free Ministries through an agency we have partnered with in the past. She presented a history of physical and emotional abuse from childhood and her current marriage. In meeting for individual sessions, her husband exhibited controlling behaviors in transporting her to church to ensure control of her whereabouts at all times. She had informed him she was meeting women for prayer, not necessarily receiving services for domestic violence. During her engagement in the program she was involved with individual sessions, support group, Mom's Group, a prayer partner, and a Bible Study. She was surrounded by a community that cared for her.

One night the physical abuse escalated to a level where she fled the home while her children stayed with the father. She called Friday at 4:30 p.m. right before beginning a holiday weekend. We contacted

a shelter that afternoon that agreed to accept her and her children. Additionally, we provided court support while she obtained an order of protection. Mary stayed in an apartment setting in the shelter for around a year. However the demands of a single mother with juggling employment, transportation, children's schooling, and finances became overwhelming. She also felt pressured by others in her life to return to her marriage in order to be a "godly" woman. She and her children eventually returned to her husband without the husband demonstrating any changes in his behavior. As we expressed concern for her safety, we also conveyed our role as a faith community to support her.

It is reported that it takes more than five attempts before a woman finally successfully leaves an abusive relationship (Barnett, 2000). Mary has since separated from the relationship and the emotionally controlling environment and has returned to the apartment connected to the shelter previously mentioned.

Mary believed that her ability to leave her husband was connected to her spiritual growth, which she recognizes is an ongoing process. Prior to leaving her husband, she wrote the following poem that she shared at a group session:

You reached deep inside of me to destroy me,  
but not deep enough.  
You hit hard to knock the sense out of me,  
but not hard enough.  
You see I am made in God's image. The core of me is di-  
vine.  
The light that for so long was hidden suddenly started to  
shine.  
I was set free in an instant, that was inspired by prayer.  
The drop of blood that once fell to break my bondage from  
hell  
Took full effect in a moment when I was ready to see  
That my Jesus not only came to save me, but He came to  
SET ME FREE!

In this partnership with Jesus Christ in ministry, Mary and other victims are healed and blessed. Prayer and scripture, coupled with our

caring community, continue to loose the chains of violence and Set Free those who hurt! ❖

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**Thay Danielson** is Co-Director of Set Free Ministries, The Moody Church, 1635 N. LaSalle Street, Chicago, IL 60614-6004. Phone: (312) 480-8626. Email: danielson\_thay@hotmail.com.

**Pat Lucas** is Co-Director of Set Free Ministries, The Moody Church, 1635 N. LaSalle Street, Chicago, IL 60614-6004. Phone: (312) 327-8600.

**Rose Malinowski**, DrPH, LCSW, is Professor of Social Work, Trinity Christian College, 6601 West College Drive, Palos Heights, IL 60463-1768. Phone: (708) 239-4849. Email: rose.malinowski@trnty.edu.

**Sharon Pittman**, Ph.D., CSWM, is Professor of Social Work, University of Texas-Pan American, 1201 West University Dr., Edinburg, TX 78541-2999.

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## Course Objectives and Outline

### Readings in the Social Work and Christianity Home Study Program, Winter 2009 Issue

Program learning objective is to increase social worker's ability to apply the new and changing conceptual frameworks (referenced in the Table of Contents) to their practice with individuals, families and the systems within which these clients interact. Social work practice category is intermediate level.

This home study program is appropriate for mental health professionals who have at least a master's degree in a mental health discipline or who are being supervised by such a professional. The target audience for the home study program includes social workers, social work students, and other professionals in related fields. *By completing the Social Work and Christianity Home Study for the Winter 2009 issue, participants will:*

1. Understand four different perspectives, or experiences, which collectively help illuminate the web of connections surrounding Christianity and violence in the family context. (**"Christianity and the Experience of Domestic Violence: What Does Faith Have to Do With It?"**) *Presentation Level: Intermediate*
2. Know several findings of a study exploring religious belief-based barriers that deter women survivors of intimate partner violence in a conservative Christian community from changing their circumstances. (**"Because of My Beliefs That I Had Acquired From the Church...": Religious Belief-Based Barriers for Adventist Women in Domestic Violence Relationships"**) *Presentation Level: Intermediate*
3. Learn several key components of a program establishing partnerships between secular providers of domestic violence services and faith communities, and understand the challenges that secular and faith-based DV service providers may face in developing similar programs. (**"A Faith Community-Domestic Violence Partnership"**) *Presentation Level: Intermediate*
4. Note several specific perceptions of a cohort of African American clergy seminarians related to domestic violence awareness and engagement in domestic violence initiatives within faith communities. (**"A Refuge for My Soul: Examining African American Clergy's Perceptions Related to Domestic Violence Awareness and Engagement in Faith Community Initiatives"**) *Presentation Level: Intermediate*
5. Describe several insights from clergy's experiences of intervention with victims and perpetrators of domestic violence in South Africa. (**"Addressing Domestic Violence: Challenges Experienced by Anglican Clergy in the Diocese of Cape Town, South Africa"**) *Presentation Level: Intermediate*
6. Describe key components of a clearinghouse website designed to facilitate a coordinated response to domestic violence in ways that are compassionate, practical and informed by the latest research and best practices by professionals, both religious and secular. (**"The RAVE Website: A Demonstration Project for the Innovative Delivery of Domestic Violence Training and Resources"**) *Presentation Level: Intermediate*
7. Know four key phases used in developing a comprehensive faith-centered domestic violence program situated in a large urban congregation. (**"Set Free Ministries: A Comprehensive Model for Domestic Violence Congregational Interventions"**) *Presentation Level: Intermediate*

### NACSW Home Study Evaluation Form

Please indicate how well the following were accomplished in this home study.

**1 – Poor/Strongly Disagree 2 – Disagree 3 – Undecided 4 – Agree 5 – Excellent/Strongly Agree**

1. The home study presentation was effective. . . . . 1 2 3 4 5
2. The information presented in this home study was appropriate given my professional education, professional training, and licensure status. . . . . 1 2 3 4 5
3. The home study offered content that addressed cultural competency and diversity.. . . . 1 2 3 4 5
4. The information presented in this home study was current and relevant to social work practice.. . . . 1 2 3 4 5
5. The article authors were knowledgeable about their topics, including new developments. . 1 2 3 4 5
6. The article authors communicated clearly and effectively. . . . . 1 2 3 4 5
7. This home study format adequately supported participant learning. . . . . 1 2 3 4 5
8. The home study provided instructions for and adequately accommodated learners with disabilities. (*circle one*) . . . . . True False
9. Any questions or problems I may have raised were addressed effectively and in a timely manner. (*circle one*) . . . . . True False
10. This home study helped me to identify key features of an empowerment map that leads to community choices, community equity, and community vitality. . . . . 1 2 3 4 5
11. This home study allowed me to identify effective strategies that engage members of diverse communities and social workers in Kingdom-building work. . . . . 1 2 3 4 5
12. Following this home study, I am able to describe stories of empowerment from U.S. and international communities. . . . . 1 2 3 4 5

*Please note any additional comments on an piece of paper and enclose it with your quiz. Thank you!*

**SOCIAL WORK & CHRISTIANITY QUIZ:** As you are reading the following articles you should be able to answer the questions below. This is an "open-book" exam. Use this page or a photocopy. Mark your answers by pressing down hard and completely filling in one circle per question. Then mail it with a \$25 payment to JournalLearning International. *Please do not send cash.*

Program learning objective: Program learning objective is to increase the reader's ability to identify ways to integrate Christian faith and professional practice, and to identify professional concerns that have relevance to Christianity, by correctly completing a multiple choice quiz. Please contact the NACSW office at info@nacs.org or 203-270-8780 (or JournalLearning if you prefer) if you need any special accommodations.

### Winter 2009 Quiz

#### "Christianity and the Experience of Domestic Violence: What Does Faith Have to Do With It?"

1. Religious women suffering abuse are often disappointed to find that their pastors have all of the following EXCEPT:

- a. limited awareness and understanding of domestic violence.
- b. modest knowledge of the resources available.
- c. a lack of ability to offer them help of an explicitly religious nature.
- d. an apparent lack of empathy regarding their personal safety and emotional health.

2. In the first ever attempt to document empirically the characteristics of men who sought assistance from a faith-based batterers' intervention program in the United States, the author found all of the following EXCEPT:

- a. Men in secular programs had a higher proportion of participants who had witnessed or experienced abuse in their childhood homes.
- b. Rates of alcohol abuse and criminal histories were similar between secular program participants and faith-based program participants.
- c. Men who were clergy referred were more likely to complete a program than those whose attendance was mandated by a judge.
- d. The faith-based program participants had more life stability factors than secular program participants.

#### "Because of My Beliefs That I Had Acquired From the Church...": Religious Belief-Based Barriers for Adventist Women in Domestic Violence Relationships"

3. All of the following EXCEPT \_\_\_\_\_ were true of the study sample.

- a. all participants were Adventist women who self-identified as survivors of spouse abuse.
- b. a total of 25 women participated in the study.
- c. researchers gathered data through in-depth interviews.
- d. researchers gathered data through focus groups.

4. Nearly all of the women in this sample held at least one of the following belief barriers EXCLUDING \_\_\_\_\_, which were externally reinforced by other people in their lives such as clergy, church members, family members, and partners.

- a. beliefs about marriage and divorce.
- b. stereotypes about Christians.
- c. beliefs about their worth in relation to others'.
- d. beliefs about Christian gender roles.

#### "A Faith Community-Domestic Violence Partnership"

5. One outstanding example of transformation was the church that developed a:

- a. spiritual spa
- b. video, Broken Vows
- c. brochure: "Domestic Violence is Spiritual Violence"
- d. quilting project

6. The most difficult challenge for the DVCC Faith Leader Training Program was:

- a. trust.
- b. sustainability.
- c. finding key individuals to lead.
- d. cultural barriers.

#### "A Refuge for My Soul: Examining African American Clergy's Perceptions Related to Domestic Violence Awareness and Engagement in Faith Community Initiatives"

7. Over 90% of clergy in the study agreed with all of the following EXCEPT:

- a. that worship should include prayers for victims of interpersonal violence.
- b. that the church should provide training on how to recognize signs of abuse.
- c. that resources should be provided to congregations to educate them about the topic of domestic violence.
- d. that church leaders are not prepared to help members of their congregation who are victims of interpersonal violence.

#### "Addressing Domestic Violence: Challenges Experienced by Anglican Clergy in the Diocese of Cape Town, South Africa"

8. Study participants noted all of the following EXCEPT in regards to dealing with domestic violence:

- a. At times one would feel really bad about the profession (priesthood) itself.
- b. You have no place to send the sad women, the other agencies (police, counselling agency, etc.) do not understand about God.
- c. Sometimes you feel like taking part because this man is physically stronger than the women. (tempted to hit the perpetrator)
- d. You can never ever force somebody (to leave an abusive relationship) because they can turn around and say she told me to leave my husband.

#### "The RAVE Website: A Demonstration Project for the Innovative Delivery of Domestic Violence Training and Resources."

9. The RAVE website provides:

- a. a range of voices
- b. sermon materials
- c. data-based evidence
- d. all of the above

#### "Set Free Ministries: A Comprehensive Model for Domestic Violence Congregational Interventions."

10. In this four-phase approach to program development, engaging in intercessory prayer:

- a. was the second phase.
- b. came before developing the program proposal.
- c. was a concerted effort throughout program implementation.
- d. all of the above.

**Please print clearly, then return with completed quiz and a \$25 payment to:**  
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## CALL FOR PAPERS: SPECIAL ISSUE ON HIV & AIDS

**Topic:** Social Work's Christian Presence in the Field of HIV & AIDS

**Anticipated Published Date:** Fall/Winter 2011

**Guest Editor:** Allison Tan

**Deadline:** Early submission/Abstracts of Intent – February 15, 2010  
Paper submission deadline – February 15, 2011

A special issue of *Social Work and Christianity (SWC)* in 2011 will focus on the work being done by social workers in the field of HIV & AIDS. As the HIV pandemic nears its third decade, this special issue will report on the role social workers have been playing and can continue to play in the provision of services to people living with HIV. Members of NACSW and other Christians working in HIV-related social work practice and/or research are encouraged to participate by submitting papers and reading the work of others.

This special journal issue seeks to include both empirical papers out of academia and conceptual/programmatic papers written by practitioners. Practitioners, in particular, should feel free to contact the guest editor to discuss options for practice-based articles and/or point-of-view papers. As always, it is the aim of this SWC special issue to illustrate the work of Christian social workers in both scholarship and practice; papers specifically addressing aspects of the practitioner's own Christian faith and/or the unique provision of faith-based services to the HIV-positive community are requested. Additionally, papers focusing on advocacy, consumer involvement, and specific social work interventions are strongly encouraged. Collaborating, multi-disciplinary authorship may be a particularly valuable exercise.

Interested authors are strongly encouraged, but not required, to submit abstracts of intent. Abstracts should be no more than one page in length and should aim to provide an overview of the paper's direction and intent as well as any preliminary findings or conclusions.

Prior to the final deadline for paper submissions, a Pre-Convention on HIV will take place at the 2010 NACSW conference. During this Pre-Convention, interested authors may choose to bring drafts or pieces of their papers for peer discussion and feedback. Pre-convention participants will engage in a collaborative process aimed to build the HIV research agenda for Christians in social work.

All potential authors are encouraged to contact Allison Tan (apizzi@luc.edu; 216.570.1423) with questions or to discuss ideas for paper submission.

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## **INSTRUCTIONS FOR AUTHORS**

Submit manuscripts to SWC electronically in the form of two documents: a separate title page that contains the title, a list of key words, and full author information, including names, affiliations, addresses, phone numbers, and email addresses; and a document without author identification that contains the full text of the article, including an abstract of not more than 150 words, references, and any tables or appendices. Use the American Psychological Association Style Manual format (6th edition) for in-text references and reference lists. Submit manuscripts as email attachments to david@sherwoodstreet.com, preferably in Microsoft Word.

At least three members of the editorial board will anonymously review manuscripts and recommend an acceptance decision based on the following criteria: relevance of content to major issues concerning the relationship of social work and Christianity, literary merit, conciseness, clarity, and freedom from language that conveys devaluation or stereotypes of persons or groups. The editor-in-chief will make final decisions.

Authors may also correspond with the editor-in-chief by phone or mail: David Sherwood, 2740 N. Crater Lane, Newberg, OR 97132. Telephone: (503) 537-0675 (H).

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