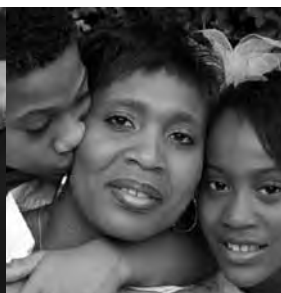


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# The Role of Men of Faith in Responding to Domestic Violence: Focus Group Themes

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Christopher St. Vil

*Men of faith have a unique role to play in responding to domestic violence. Yet, there is limited information available as to how men of faith view domestic violence and their role in responding to domestic violence. This manuscript reports on focus groups conducted with men of faith to ascertain their perceptions of domestic violence and how they felt men and boys could be engaged to address this issue. Fifty-four men participated in six focus groups and seven themes emerged from their participation. These themes included a focus on individual, faith-based, and community level responses that could be utilized to engage men in the prevention of domestic violence.*

*“Our Father in heaven we thank you for your presence in this place, for in your presence our minds have been opened and we have felt something in our spirits that will make us better people, men of faith doing what you require us to do, and that is to walk humbly with you Lord, and to be merciful, and to love one another...bless each and every one of us that we may carry on the message of domestic tranquility as opposed to hostility. That somehow in our world, in our community, we might see the kind of peace that you bring, the peace that the world can't give and the world can't take away. Bless us we pray, in the name of Jesus Christ our Lord and Savior, Amen.” – Prayer from a focus group participant*

**T**HE ROLE OF THE BLACK CHURCH AS A STEWARD OF HOPE AND SOCIAL justice in the Black community has historical and contemporary relevance. The Black Church has been an igniter of social movements, including the civil rights movement (Billingsley, 2003). It is a place where many come to receive clarity on life circumstances, to restore the mind and spirit, and to seek refuge in times of need. Therefore, the role of the Black Church is a key to responding to the issue of domestic violence. Domestic violence is a serious issue in all communities; however, the focus of this paper is on the role of men of faith within Black churches in responding to domestic violence.

Intimate partner violence and sexual assault have been found to be more prevalent and have a greater rate of lethality and serious physical injury in the African American community (Bent-Goodley, 2013a; Renison, 2003). Despite this, African American women are less likely than White females to turn to formal provider systems, such as domestic violence shelters or mental health providers, and are most likely to turn to informal provider networks, particularly their faith-based community, to receive support on how to address the violence they are experiencing (Anderson, Renner, & Danis, 2012; Bent-Goodley, 2006; Gillum, Sullivan, & Bybee, 2006). Yet, most African American churches, while female dominated in number, are led primarily by men who often have not received any formal training on issues of violence against women while in seminary or during clergy training (Brade & Bent-Goodley, 2009).

As a result, these women are at even greater risk of not getting the help and support they need to make life-empowering decisions to end the violence in their lives, despite their continued search for support and refuge within church walls (Bent-Goodley, St. Vil, & Hubbert, 2012), making the Church both a support and a barrier to responding to domestic violence (Pyles, 2007). "Clergy people have often not been helpful in dealing with the problem of domestic violence. While many women affirm the overall value of their religious faith, few say that spiritual leaders have supported their struggle to leave an abusive situation" (Miles, 2011, p. 23). Instead of abusing scripture and religious writings, churches can be a place of safety, offender accountability, and reinvigoration of building healthy relationships within the church and the broader community (Alpert, Miles, & Coffey, 2005).

The need to educate men of faith about violence against women and how they can respond is critical. There is a significant gap in services that target Black men in faith-based settings on this issue and Black women often turn to their faith communities first before reaching out to formal or external providers (Bent-Goodley, 2006; Brade & Bent-Goodley, 2009). There is a gap of knowledge in what Black men of faith understand about domestic violence and what they perceive as appropriate responses to addressing such violence. Consequently, it makes sense for the Black church to be an integral partner as a source of influence to address domestic

violence. It makes even more sense to engage men of faith in developing responses to this type of violence. This paper will examine how a group of Black men of faith perceive the role of the Black church in responding to domestic violence.

### **A Review of the Literature**

Much of the literature related to men and domestic violence is focused on how to address men as perpetrators of domestic violence. Research is limited in examining how men can be allies in responding to domestic violence. The literature is even less developed on how men of faith and Black men can respond to domestic violence. Yet men have an important role to play in responding to domestic violence. "It's time for those of us who are well meaning men to begin acknowledging the roles male privilege and socialization play in domestic and sexual abuse as well as violence against women in general. It's time for us to claim the collective responsibility we have in ending men's violence against women. It's time for us to be part of the solution" (Porter, 2006).

Instead of focusing entirely on men as perpetrators, it is vital to include a focus on men as allies to promote, prevent and respond to domestic violence (Bent-Goodley, 2012a; Crooks, Goodall, Hughes, Jaffe & Baker, 2007). Men can challenge sexist ideologies and beliefs, and negative, false, and damaging notions of masculinity and manhood (Porter, 2006). In doing this, they can examine how male privilege, even within the Black community and the Black church, intersect with domestic violence. Encouraging men to address sexism and gender inequity is an important step towards "breaking out of the man box" and recalibrating ideas of positive and healthy masculinity. Men can work with women as allies to tackle these areas and build dialogue with men that are rooted in their experience and worldview.

In a previous study (Bent-Goodley, 2006) examining African American faith-based responses to domestic violence, men of faith acknowledged that it was important for men to be a part of the solution to end domestic violence. Yet, they also stated that there was a "male code of conduct" that, at times, prohibited non-violent men from addressing the abusive and sexist behaviors of other men. They later explained that the male code of conduct essentially reinforced the idea of staying out of other's men's business to avoid the spotlight being placed on the man addressing the negative behavior. The call among men of faith is to create a sense of accountability among men to address domestic violence and to combat sexism and gender inequity even within the church. "We don't hold men accountable in the same way. How many mamas really tell their sons, 'I'm not gonna say it's okay'.... How many fathers say 'this is not going to happen'.....There's a huge burden that she [the victim] has to bear because we don't interrupt the violence....." (Bent-Goodley & Williams, 2008, p. 25). Essentially, men

of faith are being called to be an active part of stopping domestic violence and helping to strengthen the role of men as important voices to end abuse.

In order for these men to be engaged, there must also be an acknowledgement of the importance of having a gender-based approach that is designed for men. The movement to address violence against women has largely been shaped by a feminist approach, which can create a feeling that men are displaced or not welcomed as important contributors to finding solutions to address this issue. Therefore, it is important to create a shared understanding that does embrace men's roles as allies and allows for gender-based approaches to engage men in stopping violence against women (Stathopoulos, 2013). They cannot be based on gender stereotypes of manhood and masculinity (Bent-Goodley, 2012b; Stathopoulos, 2013). This approach involves recognizing that men require different types of engagement strategies from women, and that these engagement strategies should be rooted in an understanding of how men see and experience the world (Bent-Goodley, 2013b; Bent-Goodley, 2012b; Fabiano, Perkins, Wesley, Linkenbach, & Stark, 2003; Maxwell, Scourfield, Featherstone, Holland, & Tolman, 2012), particularly men of color who have different socioeconomic experiences that need to be captured (Gordon, Nichter, & Henriksen, 2013; Johnson, 2010). The literature evidences a dearth of understanding directly from men and men of faith about their ideas regarding the role of the Black church and men within the Black church in responding to domestic violence. This article reports on findings from focus groups that included hearing directly from men of faith as to the role of the Black church and men in responding to domestic violence.

### **Methodology**

Focus groups were used to obtain the perspectives of men of faith about their knowledge and perceptions of domestic violence and key strategies to engage Black men and boys in domestic violence prevention. A total of six focus groups were conducted at two Black churches among men of faith. For one church, the focus groups were held after a Sunday service and the other church accommodated the focus group in place of a regularly scheduled men's ministry meeting. Recruitment for the groups was coordinated with members of the church from a Community Advisory Board (CAB) convened as part of a larger project. The CAB representatives organized and recruited participants from their respective churches and facilitated introduction of the focus group facilitator to build trust with the participants. Consent was obtained from all of the study participants, along with permission to audiotape the focus groups.

An interview guide was developed in collaboration with the CAB. The interview guide included questions and sub-questions as well as prompts to both initiate and follow-up on discussion questions. Group facilitation

was conducted by one of the male staff on the project with an additional male staff member observing the session. Both persons received training on the interview guide and how to conduct focus groups prior to the sessions.

Data from all focus group sessions were transcribed. Transcripts were reviewed for accuracy and then used for analysis of major themes. The first stage of data analysis was conducted by two members of the research team who separately reviewed the transcripts and identified major themes emerging from the focus group discussions. These independent analyses were then examined and discussed by the team for congruence and to ensure that all themes were captured and accurately reflected the content of the discussion.

### Demographics

There were 54 men that participated in the focus groups and completed anonymous demographic surveys (Table 1). Of the participants, 98% were African-American and 2% were Turkish. The men ranged in age from 15 to 82 years old, with the majority of men (39%) being between 48 and 63 years of age. The majority (63%) had completed high school as their highest level of education, followed by 22% with a bachelor's degree, 9% with a master's degree, 2% percent with a law degree and doctorate respectively, and 2% of the participants did not provide their level of education. The majority of the participants (64%) were married, 22% were single, 6% divorced, 6% widowed, and 2% in a committed relationship. The majority (65%) of the participants was employed; while unemployed and retired members represented 5% and 26%, respectively. Most of the participants (42%) had been with their church for up to 20 years, while (52%) of the participants reported being members of their respective church for 21-60 years.

**Table 1: Demographic Characteristics of Focus Group Participants**

Characteristic	Number (N)	Percentage (%)
<b>Race &amp; Ethnicity</b>		
African-American	53	98
Turkish	1	2
<b>Age</b>		
15-31 years old	9	17
32-47 years old	4	7
48-63 years old	21	39
64-82 years old	20	37

Characteristic	Number (N)	Percentage (%)
<b>Highest Level of Education</b>		
High School	34	63
Bachelor's	12	22
Master's	5	9
JD	1	2
Doctorate	1	2
Missing	1	2
<b>Marital Status</b>		
Single	12	22
Committed Relationship	1	2
Married	35	64
Divorced	3	6
Widowed	3	6
<b>Number of Years with Church</b>		
0-20	23	42
21-40	12	22
41-60	14	26
61-82	3	6
Missing	2	4
<b>Number of Years in Christian Faith</b>		
0-20 years	12	22
21-40 years	14	26
41-60 years	14	26
61-82 years	11	20
Missing	3	6
<b>Total Participants</b>	<b>54</b>	<b>100</b>

## Themes

There were seven themes that emerged from the focus group findings. The themes included the following:

1. The fact that men have been exposed to domestic violence and have an interest in responding to domestic violence;
2. The importance of the church and men serving as role models;
3. The role of the church as being a safe place to discuss and address domestic violence;
4. The role of the church in promoting healing and forgiveness;
5. The need for the Church to partner with professionals and advocates;
6. The importance of using an intergenerational approach; and
7. The significance of putting God first.

### 1. Men's Exposure to Domestic Violence

The men discussed having been exposed to domestic violence in a number of ways. They shared how this exposure has impacted them both

personally and in terms of their relationships. A number of the men shared their experience having witnessed domestic violence in their homes as children. This experience had a profound effect on them. One participant described how he carried the experience with him into adulthood.

I hated him until I went away to college. I mean I knew the Lord; my grandmother instilled it in me to be that God type of young man. When I came back home, is when I opened up to him and tried to understand. I asked him, "Why did you hit my mother when I was a child?" And, he said that he didn't believe in God. That was his thing. But he's saved now. He's saved now and it's totally changed our love for him, but I'm not the type of guy, I'm not an abusive man, and I hate it, and what made me get to that boiling point was he hit my mom real bad and I went and got my grandfather and he came down there with his gun and he said, "I'm going to do you right now", and I think I said "Pop Pop, I don't think you should do that" and my grandfather was like "No", and he pulled that revolver and that thing clicked and I was like "Uh oh, this about to be a serious matter." But I jumped in front and my grandfather said "Ok. Get out the way," and then he just said "Okay" and then my father went in the room and my grandfather went upstairs. So that was the Lord at that point. And so, ever since then every time I see a woman gets hit or something, it bothers me a lot.

A number of the men shared this participant's experience. They attempted to make sense of what they were exposed to as a child witness of domestic violence. There was a feeling that it was important to use the experience to ensure that they did not further the cycle of abuse in their own lives. One participant shared the following:

When I was coming up it happened to my mom and it got physical, so when I seen it and experienced it from that aspect I knew that it wasn't right, so I broke the cycle. It's like you have to break the cycle, cause like you said it can happen to family members and when you're small coming up, you see it as a man growing up you feel as though it's right. And I think it comes from jealousy and whatever, insecurities stuff like that and you have to break that cycle. And I think when I turned my life over that helped me, because I knew it wasn't right. You know. I've seen my mom almost killed by my father...and I'd hate to see anybody in that type of situation.

A number of the men had not witnessed domestic violence in their homes but they had been exposed to domestic violence in their community. These participants stressed how experiences impacted them and their sense of what was right and wrong related to domestic violence. They also described their sense of outrage that a man would be abusive towards a woman. One of the participants described it as follows:

It really affects me a lot...there was a young man that was on the corner beating his girlfriend. He was literally beating her, like punching her. And there were five of us coming around the corner. We beat him. I mean, he socked her in the eye, and I was like "What is he doing." We couldn't understand.

The men talked about how being exposed to domestic violence impacted them and how they tried to develop an understanding of why a man would be abusive to a woman. They also talked about how they used their faith to help them through these challenges.

## **2. Importance of Role Modeling**

The men discussed the importance of role modeling. They shared that it was very important for the Black church and for men of faith to be positive role models in promoting healthy relationships, domestic violence prevention, and gender equity. They emphasized that this was important for Black men due to the number of young men that grow up without fathers in the home. One participant shared that men of faith should lead by example:

As men of faith, we need to continue to be strong examples and let our light shine. Like the brother said, don't cover the lamp. And the outside world, and the family will see that. I've had people, young guys on my job, they come to me, and they give me all this information, and I'm like, man, you giving me a little too much information. This one young brother told me, he said, man, I never met my father. I don't know who my father is. I'm like wow. You know, he opened up to me like that, so I'm talking to him. But, people won't come to you if you're grouchy, and mean, and putting up this macho front. You've got to humble yourself as a man of God.

They emphasized that being a role model could be different based on whether or not the man is a person of faith. They stated that the approach was important based on the man's sense of his connectedness with God. However, change first begins with the man of faith being an example of God's love. This idea was expressed as follows:

We also have to realize that we're dealing with two types of people. The person that believes in God and then there's the person that may not know God. They're going to act two different ways. So in order for the men of faith to interact in that environment, they first have to do it themselves. We have to be the ultimate example for all the world to see.

The men also felt that the Church has a responsibility to address domestic violence. The Church must actively discuss domestic violence prevention and be committed to growing in its role as a place of refuge. They also emphasized that the Church must be a beacon where persons can obtain help for domestic violence and where men can also be held accountable for their actions.

Just to go back to Nazareth... it says do you hide a lamp up under a bush or do you set it up on the hill? The church has to be the light, and not just a verbal light, it has to be a physical light where you can go and see, what a husband is, what a man is. What a man is according to what God said a man should be, and then that's how the world is supposed to learn. That's the whole purpose of the church being here in the first place.

Therefore, men of faith must be role models for each other and the next generation. They also must be supported by Black churches that have the philosophy that the church itself must provide an example of positive and healthy masculinity and gender equity.

### **3. The Church as a Safe Place**

The participants emphasized the role of the church as being a safe place to discuss and address domestic violence. The men described a number of ways that the Black church can serve as a safe place. First, they stressed that it is important to meet men where they are. One man described this as follows:

Men of faith, in dealing with the different demographics of those who don't believe and might be babes in Christ, compared to ones that are the meek saved in Christ, and also those who don't know Christ, we have to meet them where they are number one. We can't look at them as saying, we're all this, we have arrived and we're any better than them.

As part of meeting the men where they are, it is also important to remember that one is no better than the person being helped. It was stressed that looking down on another man is unacceptable and does not create a safe place for an exchange and for growth. One of the participants identified it as follows:

I knew when to say no. That's the only difference, and so we have to meet those persons that same way. We're no better than you. We've had challenges. We've had skeletons in our closets; some of us if we're honest got cemeteries in our closets, but look at them, not for what they've done, but who they can be. I think that's how I would address it as men of faith, in a faith-based formulation.

It is important that men can feel safe in sharing their pain. In order to have a place where men can be challenged and grow in healthy masculinity, one must be able to comfortably and without judgment share their feelings and their pain. Men must also commit to ensuring that confidentiality is maintained. One of the participants described it as follows:

This goes right on top of what you both just said, and that is men of faith have to demonstrate a sense of confidentiality so that people feel comfortable with sharing some of their pain and the distress they're going through. Cause I believe in our sanctuary every Sunday, there's somebody with a lot of pain, they don't know how to unburden themselves. They hold on to it, and they ask God to help them through it, but God is expecting us as men of faith to be able to help them and work with them without saying to everybody else that I prayed for sister so and so, they going through this and that, and did you know that she-you know that's not a man of faith. We keep it to ourselves and give people the confidence that they can share things with us, so we can help them.

Finally, it was noted that men of faith must be good listeners and able to really hear someone when they share their experiences. In addition, it is important that men of faith be observant of the person and able to engage men based on what they are seeing and hearing. One of the participants described it as follows:

Be good listeners. If you just listen when someone comes to talk to you they crying out. Like they said, they could be smiling on the outside, but crying on the inside.

#### **4. The Church as Promoting Healing and Forgiveness**

The men also concurred that the church should be a place that promotes healing and forgiveness. They stressed that Black men are dealing with a multitude of challenges that impact their sense of self and their growth as men. They felt that it was important that the Church be a space where men can reconnect with themselves and find solace.

You have to love self first, and you have a lot of guys who do not love self. Until you love yourself for real, you are not going to love nobody else. You think you will, but you're not.

They also stressed the importance of men forgiving themselves and others for what they have witnessed, experienced, and continue to try to work through in their everyday lives. Therefore, they emphasized that the Church should be a place of forgiveness, whereby men can safely express themselves and forgive themselves. It is important to mention that they did not talk about forgiveness from the standpoint of women being taught to forgive abusers. The idea of forgiveness was really about giving men a space where they can heal and find forgiveness for other issues that affect their emotional and spiritual well-being. One participant described it as follows:

...it comes with lack of knowledge and wisdom that's necessary in life today. We punish ourselves, a lot just like on a spiritual journey, you know, a lot of people may feel like they can't get to what the Lord has for them because of all that they've done, which is in turn not forgiving themselves, so bottling up within self and not allowing it to heal or forgive definitely plays a role in how things are....

They described the power of men being able to share their stories. The idea that sharing one's testimony was very important towards finding healing and forgiveness. They felt that the Church was a place where men should be able to learn from the testimony of others and share their own testimony as part of healing themselves.

Most people feel more comfortable talking about it when you give them personal testimony because they can relate to that versus you like coming on them, asking them what's going on with them. You gotta first, open it up.

These strategies for healing and forgiveness are important and were given as examples of how men of faith can find a safe place within the church.

## **5. The Need to Partner with Professionals and Advocates**

The men also emphasized the importance of churches partnering with professionals to address issues of domestic violence and other issues that cross into the church. Churches do not have the ability to singularly address any specific issue. They represent a microcosm of issues within a community. There is not always expertise on each issue to fully address them. Therefore, having partnerships with professionals and advocates is important in order for the church to build its capacity to address domestic violence.

Another thing we can do, and we've done it before through our Christian education ministry, is brought in other professionals to talk about things that we need for our life, outside of the church building...bringing in professionals that can talk about alternatives to violence that can keep a tranquil home environment. People need to know the 1-2-3 to do.... We may not have the answers to that experience, but there are professionals who can tell you, 1,2,3, this is what you do. We could bring the men and have all the men there.

## **6. Using an Intergenerational Approach**

The men stressed the importance of using an intergenerational approach. They discussed the importance of being able to build relationships across generations around these issues. The church often has men representing different generations within the church. Therefore, it is a place where men can engage each other and boys around how to address domestic violence.

You do have a responsibility, because you have people that look up to you. Young kids need to look up to the elders, and elders need to abide by the unwritten rule of morality. I mean, you've got to have morality within yourself so that somebody can follow you.

In addition to older men serving as examples and resources for younger men, it is important that older men minister to younger men and boys and offer them positive examples that they may or may not have been exposed to as children. The men described ministering to younger men and boys as follows:

So I think if we get the church and just start ministering to our young brothers, our men, and talk about these issues that have been so taboo that no one wants to talk about, bring [them] here to the church and maybe create a ministry, you know, just on [that].

## **7. Putting God First**

The men acknowledged that first and foremost, above all things mentioned, that one must put God first in responding to domestic violence. They stressed that men of faith must do all things first rooted in God. Efforts to address domestic violence must begin in prayer and a true commitment to grounding the work needed in God.

We really cannot forget to put God first. We must pray about this constantly, we must come together and pray, you know pray individually, you know, and just keep God first because He can do things that we can't. You know because this is a battle that we can't win. Brothers as strong as we are together you know there's an enemy out there that's a lot stronger and we need the Lord to guide us and be with us, and really work on those things out that we can't work out ourselves.

### **Discussion and Implications**

Men of faith are important partners in responding to domestic violence. They have an interest in being a part of the solution and can be energized to galvanize around this issues and creating lasting change. The Black church also has an important and notable place in responding to domestic violence. It is important to note that the men were clear that they had a role to play in addressing domestic violence and they understood that, as men of faith, their responsibility was even greater. They also acknowledged that the Black church must be engaged and be willing to be engaged to make a difference around this issue. It is important to note that the men wanted to be engaged. They were eager to share their ideas and be a part of the action steps necessary to actualize their ideas.

While women must be engaged, it is equally important that men of faith are engaged using gender-based approaches that are respectful of who they are as men. One should not assume that men do not want to engage. The focus group findings show that there are men interested in responding to domestic violence. It also shows that many men who have witnessed domestic violence as children and have been impacted by this issue can be engaged because of their awareness of how this issue can impact men and women as they grow. There is also a group of these men that want to change the cycle of abuse in their families and communities. They can be powerful partners in addressing domestic violence.

Men of faith can help other men in their healing process and can be supportive in creating a sense of emotional and spiritual well-being needed in communities. The church is a vehicle that can help support such inner examination, reflection, and growth. It is important that the work being done is intergenerational, allowing different groups of men to model and be modeled. Hearing these messages from other men is powerful. The messages, however, must be rooted in God's word and his positive messages of empowerment and victory.

Professionals and advocates must be willing to engage these men and support them where they are. Such professionals need to be comfortable

within their own sense of spirituality and religion and ability to engage men. In order to assist, the social worker must be clear about his or her faith and religious beliefs.

There must be an ability to work with persons that may not share the same faith and religious beliefs. Being able to do this requires significant inquiry into transference and countertransference issues that could arise in the helping process. Therefore, the practitioner needs to conduct self-examination regarding how faith and religious beliefs can impact the helping process. They must be able to confront their own ideas and notions of working with men and connect with men in positive ways that build on their strengths and what they can offer.

In order for this to work, the practitioner must see the value of working with men and trust that they have something to contribute to responding to this issue. Practitioners may need to confront their own ideas about the role of men in responding to domestic violence. There has to be a conscious effort to learn the skills to engage men. Finally, it is important that more research is done with men to understand their ideas and perceptions about domestic violence and how they can help as allies to end domestic violence.

### Conclusion

While there is significant research on how to engage men as perpetrators of abuse, there is little literature that discusses men's role in responding to domestic violence, and even less that includes the thinking of men of faith and Black men of faith. This study provides perceptions from such men about how men and men of faith can be engaged in responding to domestic violence. They also discuss the role of the Black church in preventing domestic violence. Further inquiry and understanding of the role of men is important to being able to truly address domestic violence from a comprehensive stance. There is an opportunity and willingness from many men to be a part of the solution and to work with women as allies to stop domestic violence. It is time to create new opportunities to engage men of faith and churches to creating last change around this issue in their communities. ❖

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