

2013

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## Recommended Citation

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<http://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/honorsprojects/216>

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Intimate Partner Violence: How Churches Can Circumvent Domestic Violence

Collette Noble

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### Intimate Partner Violence: How Churches Can Circumvent Domestic Violence

The idea of male dominance is still prevalent despite efforts of women to be seen as equal in the eyes of all. It is often this belief that men use as an excuse to abuse their female counterparts. Intimate partner violence, affects one in four women. Data from ten countries shows that between 55 percent and 95 percent of women who have been physically abused by their significant other have not contacted anyone for help or reported the abuse (Domestic Violence Statistics, 2013). The fact that domestic violence is so prevalent yet so underreported, makes intimate partner violence a predominant concern of the United States government.

Another large aspect of intimate partner violence is the role of religion. Many men use the Bible as a tool to justify their abuse and women often disclose their abuse to their religious leaders rather than the police (Strickland, Welshimer, & Sarvela, 1998). The men are enabled to use religion to justify their abuse when the church uses patriarchal norms that encourage men to be leaders of the house and wives to be obedient to them. Due to these ideas, “not only does it give the husband the right to make final decisions for the family, but it bestows upon him the right to declare the decisions as a divine edict” (Strickland, Welshimer, & Sarvela, 1998, p. 307). It is estimated that about 40 percent of battered women will seek help from their clergy (Strickland, Welshimer, & Sarvela, 1998). This puts religious leaders in a difficult position because they then must learn how to react to this disclosure and how to recommend these women for different services. It is also an issue because “religion is paradoxically both a source of assistance and a barrier to women surviving domestic violence” (Pyles, 2007, p. 281). This means that some religious leaders may use scripture and their influence to encourage these women to stay in their abusive relationships rather than using their influence positively. For example, “some Christian and Jewish denominations have drawn on various biblical references and other cultural sources to argue that wives have a duty to maintain their marriages at all costs” (Pyles, 2007, p.282).

Clergy could use scripture to counsel the perpetrators of abuse to stop or use it to counsel these women to safety.

The purpose of this project is to discuss the different types of abuse as well as develop a program churches can use to deal with intimate partner violence. A program is needed for church leaders because many church leaders are uneducated on the issues associated with intimate partner violence. They are often unaware of the different forms the abuse can take and can therefore advise these women in the wrong direction. Bringing education to church leaders and the church on intimate partner violence will raise awareness on the issues and promote the idea that it is not to be accepted in the church. In order to make it possible for religious leaders to bring up these issues in their congregation and break apart the many aspects of intimate partner violence, they first must be knowledgeable on the subject. I began this project by first consulting clergy members in Michigan. I wanted to know what information was out there and if any churches already had programs in place to deal with domestic violence. After this, I consulted the research, to see what information was out there on religious abuse and the churches involvement in intimate partner violence. I also looked at scripture, sermons, and other churches ideas for programs.

### **Types of Abuse**

#### **Physical and Emotional Abuse**

Physical abuse is what is most commonly thought of when referring to intimate partner violence. When picturing domestic violence it is typical to picture a man hitting his wife. Although it is also important to note that not all intimate partner violence consists of a man abusing a woman, this is typically the case. However, it is possible for women to be the abusers. Physical violence can take many forms such as hitting, scratching, pushing, using a weapon to threaten, or forcing someone to perform a sexual act (Types of Abuse, 2011). Creating a safety

plan is a big concern with physical or sexual abuse. As with all the other forms of abuse it is important to realize that there is no excuse for this behavior and that safety is of the utmost importance at this point. Emotional and verbal abuse can invoke fear and humiliation in those being abused. This type of abuse often happens through manipulation and criticism. The abuser is constantly putting the victim down in an attempt to reduce their self-esteem. Another form of emotional abuse is to prevent the victim from seeing or talking to their family or friends. The goal of that previous type of abuse is to isolate the victim allowing the abuser more control. Like all other forms of abuse verbal and emotional abuse is all about the abuser trying to control their victim. Other examples include threatening to commit suicide if the victim left them, threats, telling them what to do and wear, intentionally embarrassing them in public, and threatening to take their children away (Types of Abuse, 2011). The consequences of emotional and verbal abuse can last just as long as that of physical abuse. It is possible that victims will internalize all of this verbal abuse and begin to believe it themselves. It could lead to long lasting anxiety issues, depression, and even possibly post-traumatic stress disorder. The toll on the victim's self-esteem could result in chronic psychological issues.

### **Financial**

Financial abuse is one of the types of abuse that is rarely talked about and not as well known. This type of abuse is also about control. In this sense the abuser controls the victim by controlling the money she has access to and how she can spend it. This can show up in many forms. Some examples include not letting the victim work, taking the victim's paychecks, not allowing the victim access to money or shared bank accounts, giving the victim a small weekly allowance, etc (Bent-Goodley and Fowler, 2006). This form of abuse makes it difficult for the victim to leave or get help. Often the victim is scared that if she leaves she will have no form of

financial support for her or possibly her children. This could be a large motivation to stay in an abusive relationship.

### **Religious**

Religious abuse is another lesser-known form of abuse that is lesser known. Religious abuse is when an abuser misuses religion as a way to control, manipulate, or demean their victim. Bent-Goodley and Fowler commented on this in their article on religious abuse stating “scripture may become a means of stimulating confusion and anger when it is used to manipulate and control a partner (2006, p. 284). The authors here want to differentiate between emotional abuse and religious abuse because often, religious abuse is put in the category of emotional abuse. This form of abuse can be most severe since the women are not only being abused but are being told that God agrees with this abuse. Another form of this abuse is to limit their victim’s access to religious events such as religious small groups, Sunday services, or church meetings. Many churches do not promote gender equity in their sermons, which can strengthen the abusers argument for control. These churches often perpetuate intimate partner violence in “overt and covert” ways (Bent-Goodley and Fowler, 2006, p. 284). Some examples they gave were denying communal worship to women, limiting their religious activities, and using scripture to manipulate and control the women. Abusers will use the church to their advantage in order to promote their right to dominance. This can be a very severe form of abuse since it can isolate their victim in terms of their friends, family, and their religion. There hasn’t been much research on how the clergy can help reverse the damaging effects of religious abuse, mainly because religious abuse has just recently been accepted as a form of abuse. Despite this, there have been some suggestions in what could potentially help. These include prayer, a women’s recovery support group, individual spiritual counseling, and social support (Danielson, Lucas, Malinowski, & Pittman, 2009).

**Effect on Children**

A big aspect of intimate partner violence, which is often overlooked or underemphasized, is the effect of this abuse on children in the home. Many are under the false belief that young children are not aware of the abuse. The children in these homes are more at risk for emotional, behavioral, and social problems. When children witness aggression they often internalize it and repeat it later in life. This ends up repeating the cycle of violence as children express their aggression in the same way they have seen done in their childhood. Other social problems children may have are anxiety issues, depression, oppositional behavior, and low self-esteem (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2009). The effect of this violence on children often becomes apparent in their schoolwork and demeanor. It is common for children from homes experiencing domestic violence to have more trouble in the school setting such as getting lower grades, slower cognitive development, limited problem solving skills, etc (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2009).

Jerome Kolbo, Eleanor Blakely, and David Engleman (1996) found correlations between domestic violence and children having emotional, behavioral, and emotional problems. They believed that these problems ranged depending on the gender of the child, the type of violence they saw, the amount of violence they saw, and at what age they witnessed the violence. Although there is still much research to be done on the effect of witnessing domestic violence on children, it has been shown that children can become maladaptive in many different facets of their lives.

**Church Involvement****Past**

As society changes, the relationships among people also change and mold with society. Society was once considered patriarchal, only allowing men to vote, only male positions in government, and only allowing men to have jobs. This has drastically changed over the years. With these changes, come changes in marriage. Marriage was once seen as a dominant relationship, having a wife be more like property than another person. Now marriages are seen as an equal partnership, based on companionship (Clark, 2011). Churches of all denominations were mainly a purely patriarchal environment. Only men could be religious leaders and only men could be involved in the direction of the church. When this was true, domestic violence was almost seen as a common occurrence, since wives were property. The church also wanted to protect marriage above anything else. As Clark states in her essay on domestic violence, wives had to “accept abuse, they could think of themselves as martyrs and pride themselves on their piety” (2011, p. 196). Although there are still some churches out there that value marriage above all else and only allow male religious leaders, this is no longer the majority. Women are now extremely involved in the church, even going so far as to become pastors in liberal churches such as some Lutheran churches and other Christian denominations. Due to the evolution of society, domestic violence is now more commonly recognized as wrong and spoken out against in churches. This is shown by the many programs established by churches to address domestic violence in their church and community such as the one from Set Free Ministries (Danielson, Lucas, Malinowski, & Pittman, 2009). This commonly happens when someone in the congregation has had their lives shaped by intimate partner violence.

### **Barriers**

Although the church can be very helpful in identifying abuse and recommending resources, there are also some obstacles to women coming forward. Church leaders are sometimes afraid to recommend the victim to other resources due to lack of knowledge or due to

religious beliefs. Churches often believe that it is a religious duty of the wife to stay with her husband despite any form of abuse. Author Loretta Pyles comments on this in her article on domestic violence stating, “Survivors of domestic violence have reported being told by their ministers that they should stay in abusive relationships even though they are in severe physical and emotional danger” (2007, p. 282). Church leaders often use scripture about a woman maintaining her wedding vows in an attempt to lure the woman into staying. This leads to feelings of guilt in the victim about disclosing the abuse or about wanting to leave. The clergy may also express empathy for the woman’s suffering but suggest that she should suffer as Christ did, and just submit more to her husband (Pyles, 2007). Although this does still occur, it is becoming less common for the clergy to do this. In one study “What Would They Do? Latino Church Leaders and Domestic Violence”, they found that the majority of clergy did not believe that it was God’s will for the women to stay in these harmful relationships or that they deserved to get hit (Behnke, Ames, & Hancock, 2011). In this study, when the clergy were asked what they would do, 67% said they would try to counsel the couple, 25% said they would offer spiritual guidance. Only 21% of this sample said they would recommend legal action (Behnke, Ames, & Hancock, 2011).

Another big mistake a church leader can make without the proper education is to place the blame on the woman or make excuses for her husband. In the Behnke, Ames, & Hancock study, it was found that church leaders disagree about whether or not abuse is a man or a woman’s fault. In this same study they found that church leaders believe that drugs or alcohol caused the abuse, not the men themselves (2011). These church leaders often believe that these men want to stop being violent and can change. Occasionally they offer group therapy, which could end up being very dangerous for those involved, especially the wife since she disclosed the abuse. Church leaders need to be educated that drugs and alcohol can often escalate abuse but it

is not the causative factor. Church leaders also need to be aware of how unsafe the situation could be for the woman. If the church leader tries to discuss it with a couple it could lead to a lethal situation for the woman. Finally, it is the church leader's responsibility to hold the man accountable for his actions no matter what excuse.

### **Program**

#### **Church's Role**

Churches present an interesting role in domestic violence, since as previously discussed many women will first report their abuse to their religious leader. There needs to be a protocol in place that a church can use if a case of domestic violence is reported to them. A potential protocol that could be useful would be having a list of resources to recommend to victims of domestic violence if they reveal their abuse. These could include social workers, shelters, and therapists. Tricia Bent-Goodley, Noelle St. Vil & Paulette Hubbert (2012) suggested ideas churches could use in their mission to address domestic violence in the church. They came up with four different facets in which the church can help which include encouraging awareness on the topic of domestic violence, promoting gender equity in the church, supporting more involvement in the issues of domestic violence, and improving clergy training. Using this as a basis to form a program to address domestic violence is a good fit for the church. The church can utilize these ideas through sermons, activism, education, and support groups. Churches can also become more involved in their communities, identifying resources and making connections that these women can then use.

In order for the church to be effective in preventing domestic violence, they first need to want to adopt a program to circumvent the problem. It was also imperative to look at the community and see what is already in place in some churches. Most churches do not have anything significant in place for domestic violence. Some churches do have flyers on the doors in

their bathrooms that identify a domestic violence hotline women can call for help. It does seem that many churches are now aware of the dangerousness of domestic violence, and would counsel women on how to get out of that situation. However, these were more liberal churches in the Grand Rapids area. Also, some of the pastors noted that they bring up domestic violence in their pre-marriage counseling sections. In addition to these services, some pastors mentioned that they have a staff person about once a week that is specialized in the area of domestic violence.

### **Sermons**

Sermons are the way that a religious leader communicates to his or her congregation. It usually involves picking a lesson that is to be used that week and using scripture to enforce that lesson. Most members of the church go once a week or even twice a week to hear these messages. It is their way of connecting with God and worshipping together. This is why weekly sermons can be a very useful place to begin to educate the congregation on the issues surrounding domestic violence. There are examples of how this lesson can be achieved in sermons, some even specific to a religion. For example in one Jewish sermon on domestic violence, they said this, while talking about domestic violence “This requires us to take a stand, to remember that we cannot watch on as neutral bystanders, that we must not stand by idly and watch our neighbor bleed. (Lev. 19:16). “Tzedek, tzedek, tirdof,” the Torah implores us to actively pursue justice. (Deut. 16:20)” (Enger, 2010). Too often, scripture has been used as a way to oppress women and their rights. It is often implied through scripture that women are to be subordinate to men and thus is used as an excuse for men to mistreat their wives. Bent-Goodley and Fowler (2006) discussed this in their article on spiritual and religious abuse, stating that religious leaders need to understand the numerous interpretations of the Bible that are used incorrectly in order to control women.

In Nancy Nason-Clark's article, "When Terror Strikes at Home", violence against women in families of faith is addressed. She raises concerns about the interface between religion and domestic violence. She discusses the importance of addressing domestic violence in sermons and how "through sermons or information material...victims feel safe to come forward" (2004, p. 307) and if a victim sees her religious leader discussing domestic violence and being firmly against it, it gives her an opportunity to come forward and trust that leader. While writing a sermon on domestic violence, the religious leader should consider finding scripture that supports the idea that domestic violence is wrong. It is also important that throughout all sermon series, not just those discussing domestic violence, that there is scripture used that promotes gender equity. The reason this is important is discussed in Ellison, Trinitapoli, Anderson & Johnson's article, "Race/Ethnicity, Religious Involvement, and Domestic Violence" (2007). They state, "Ideologies that sanction male dominance, as well as relative power differentials between partners have also been linked with domestic violence" (p.1095). This means that using scripture that promotes male power and supporting large differences gender roles, the church may unknowingly promote violence towards women. It is also valuable to display what is preached. Religious leaders can show gender equality by respecting women, letting them take part in decisions made in the church, and allowing women in leadership roles (Bent-Goodley, St, Vil, & Hubbert, 2012). By condemning domestic violence in the church, church leaders can turn a barrier for women into a positive thing. Abusers will no longer be able to validate their abuse with interpretation of scripture and women will be more comfortable coming forward.

### **Resources/Safety Assessment**

Religious leaders sometimes misuse their role in the lives of abused women. They often believe that they can be their only support, supporting them getting out of the situation, help with legal issues, and also psychiatric support. However religious leaders are out of their depth when

it comes to everything involved in a victim's care. This is especially true if she is still in a violent situation and looking to get out. This is why it can be extremely beneficial for churches to identify reliable resources in the community to help with these situations. These can include policemen in the community, social work, shelters, clinical psychologists, and legal offices. "By partnering with other professions and formal providers, churches can expand their capacity to address domestic violence" (Bent-Goodley, St. Vil, & Hubbert, 2012, p. 62) This quote explains that although churches can hear an abuse outcry and help support the victim, it is essential that the victim be provided with additional resources to meet all of the victim's needs.

Before identifying the resources that are needed, the religious leader should ask specific questions about the abuse outcry. When a victim first discloses the abuse, now is not the time to shy away from the subject. It is necessary to assess the lethality of the situation. If the victim were in imminent danger, it would be time to use resources such as policemen or shelters in the area. Church leaders should come up with a way to measure the violence of the situation so they have a systematic way of assessing it. An easy example would be to bring in a calendar and either have the victim recall each day and write what occurred down or to take home with her and do it there. It is through this that the clergy could see how often the violence occurs and if it is escalating (Kropp, 2008). The victim needs to be the leader's ultimate source of information. Only she can provide information on the offender's past history of abuse and how it has progressed. The religious leader should keep in mind that if the abuse is sexual, the victim might choose not to disclose this information for fear of judgment. The church should also know that this assessment should not be a one-time occurrence. Since violence often escalates or the type of violence can change, it is necessary that the safety assessments be ongoing throughout the victim's road to recovery.

By developing this system, the church has a way to document the abuse and figure out the lethality of the situation. If the church is connecting with other community resources, it could be shared with these resources as a way of ranking the help needed by the victim. This tool as well as partnerships in the community can lead the church to be more effective in their responses to domestic violence. By cultivating meaningful relationships with social workers or any resources in the community, churches can not only help the victim but also themselves and those organizations deal with domestic violence on a large scale (Bent-Goodley, St. Vil, & Hubbert, 2012).

The church plays an important role in the disclosure of abuse because of the trust that the church represents. Many women do not choose to reveal abuse to other agencies in the community or even policemen because they do not have a history of trust with them. In this sense, the church can actually be a tool used by other organizations or the police department. So partnering with other organizations in the community can allow a pooling of resources and providing the victim with comprehensive care team (Strickland, Welshimer, & Sarvela, 1998). Since the church cannot take all aspects of a victim's care, it is important to know what role they should take. They can provide resources, provide emotional support and spiritual support, help with activism to help prevent a similar situation down the road, and they can also be a prayer support for the victim. Although they should not advise on legal issues, they could be present and supportive during these times. They could have prayer groups formed with the victim or they can be emotionally present for things such as court hearings for divorce, custody, or protection orders. Lastly, the church should know that it takes on average five attempts before a woman successfully leaves the violence situation (Danielson, Lucas, Malinowski, & Pittman, 2009). This is important for the church to know so they do not become disheartened if the victim they just

spend energy on decides to go back to the relationship. This is a common occurrence and has nothing to do with the way the church handled the situation.

### **Cultural and Ethnic Differences**

It is of no surprise that different cultures and ethnicities handle their problems differently based on how their belief systems. Individuals base how they react to things and live their lives based on what they believe. This is true about domestic violence. Domestic violence is more common in some cultures rather than others and is also sometimes underreported due to the cultural aspects of the victim. There is also a difference in how churches deal with domestic violence based on their ethnicity. For example, “Latinos in the United States have been less likely to seek domestic violence prevention and intervention services” (Behnke, Ames, & Hancock, 2011, p. 1260). This is an ethnic difference in regards to domestic violence. It is important for churches to know this because then Latino churches know that the women in their church may not be willing to come forward. Another reason that Latino women are less likely to seek help for domestic violence is because they could have a fear of deportation. Domestic violence in general is thought to be underreported and this is one of the contributing factors. Many of these women are also unable to come forward due to language barriers. This is why it is important for churches to have handouts and hotline numbers in both English and Spanish. There should also be an available translator if a woman does decide to disclose the abuse.

There are also ethnic differences in who experiences domestic violence more. “African American women experienced nearly four times more partner violence than White women” (Ellison, Trinitapoli, Anderson, & Johnson, 2007, p. 1097). These rates are for a variety of factors. One being that men are more likely to be abusive if they are unemployed and the unemployment rate for African Americans tends to be higher than Caucasians. This is important because now predominantly African American churches can know the factors that lead to abuse

in their congregation and are more able to circumvent it. They could provide these men with more teachings on how to deal with anger and conflict. Another risk factor for a violent relationship is a younger couple. The church having pre-marital counseling or even counseling throughout their marriage could help avoid this. This statistic is also of important because African American women are also more likely to have a serious injury or be killed by their abuser (Bent-Goodley, St. Vil, & Hubbert, 2012). The church should be aware of this so they know how lethal a situation can really be and know what populations are more at risk for harm than others.

### **Education and Clergy Involvement**

It is important that when religious leaders go to seminary that they learn how to deal with the problem of domestic violence. The research shows that until recently, it has been very rare for a seminary education of any ethnicity or denomination to include teachings on domestic violence (Benke, Ames, & Hancock, 2011). The first thing they should learn about is the different types of domestic violence so they can identify it when it occurs. Secondly, they should learn about how to incorporate gender equity into their sermons and teachings in order to prevent domestic violence. The other main issue is for religious leaders to be aware of how to handle a situation in which the abuse is being disclosed. It is important to know that in no circumstance should the leader blame the victim. Domestic violence is about control and there are no excuses for the actions of the abuser. Clergy need to be aware of their feelings in regards to domestic violence in order to keep their comments and emotions in check. “Pastoral counseling/psychotherapy with battered women needs to be highly self-monitoring to avoid victim-blaming” (Cooper-White, 1996, p. 12). Cooper-White brings up the important point that it is necessary for clergy to identify their feelings about the situation and keep them in-check. If

they are counseling a victim, they need to empathize rather than attribute the violence to the woman's acts.

When the abuse victim discloses the abuse, the first thing the church leader should do is believe her. It is often hard for religious leaders to see a person in their congregation as an abuser, which could lead them to doubt the victim's story (Cooper-White, 1996). It is imperative that religious leaders know that these men can have different sides. Many abusive men are instrumental in their communities, but yet batterers at home. Religious leaders need to allow women to have an opportunity to share their stories, free of blame or guilt, which can help liberate them and find their faith again. Many times, religion can be a solace for women when religious leaders use it correctly. Through prayer, meditation, and counseling, it is hoped that women can start their recovery process and get help (Bent-Goodley & Fowler, 2006). In addition to believing the victim, it is crucial that the religious leader employ discretion and confidentiality. This is especially true in regards to the husband. Bringing in the husband for counseling along with the victim can be dangerous for everyone involved and potentially lethal for the wife who disclosed. The woman could also be afraid of judgments or gossiping from the church members.

The balance between confidentiality and concealing the abuse must be defined. This is because "maintaining the secret protects the abuser, follows a code of silence, creates isolation of the victim, and promotes continuation of the cycle of abuse" (Danielson, Lucas, Malinowski, & Pittman, 2009, p. 481). This is where activism can be employed. After the woman who disclosed is in a safe situation and out of the abusive relationship, it could be helpful for her to tell her story. If she is willing to share her story it could be beneficial for the congregation to hear it. Letting the congregation know of the issues and that it does occur in the church can lead to more awareness and understanding. It brings the issue closer to home rather than following the belief that it only happens to non-religious, poorer people. It could lead to a domino effect in which

more women come forward and more women are aware of the issues surrounding abuse. By doing this, the congregation can get more involved in the issues of domestic violence. Examples could be starting or helping out a shelter, coming up with church-related domestic violence events, celebrating domestic violence awareness month, etc. Another intervention the church can use would be creating workshops for the congregation taught by the religious leaders. These workshops could address the components of a healthy relationship and also how to constructively deal with conflict in a marriage (Stricklang, Welshimer, & Savelle, 1998).

### **Conclusion**

The connection between domestic violence and the church cannot be ignored. The church can be such a vital asset to other organizations in the community looking to decrease the amount of domestic violence in the United States. This all starts with education. It is necessary that seminary school integrate domestic violence into its teachings so pastors become more comfortable addressing it in their church. They can address it in their church through sermons, activism, and public awareness. Church leaders also need to be aware of all the different forms domestic violence can take so they can be more apt at identifying it and understanding it. Knowing some of the causes and ethnic/cultural differences of domestic violence can also be crucial information for clergymen. As domestic violence grows into a public health issue, the church will be an integral part in helping break the cycle of violence.

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