

Walking Alongside: Strengthening Congregational Community Ministries >>>Domestic Violence

What is Domestic Violence Ministry?

Faith communities involved in ministry around the topic of domestic violence can assist and intervene in the lives of those victimized by abuse. Those who have been abused often first seek assistance from their faith community, and yet many Clergy feel unprepared regarding how to help. A ministry in this area focuses on education and awareness within the faith community, building local partnerships, and addressing practical ways the congregation can assist. Faith communities that are aware of how to support victims of abuse will be less likely to create additional harm which leads to revictimization.

Why is there a need?

Domestic violence is about power and control, with one party seeking to gain and maintain control over the other. Although the abuse may start out as minor incidents, generally those incidents become increasingly stronger over time.

In the United States, 1 in 3 women and 1 in 4 men have experienced some form of abuse, rape, or stalking in their lifetime. 1 in 4 women and 1 in 7 men have experienced severe physical violence by an intimate partner. Nearly half of all individuals have experienced psychological aggression by an intimate partner. 1 in 6 women and 1 in 19 men have experienced stalking that made them fear being harmed or killed. Women of color, individuals with disabilities, and members of the LGBTQ+ community are at even greater risk for victimization (National, 2010). The impact of domestic violence is fear for safety, PTSD, and injury. Increased health concerns include asthma, diabetes, high blood pressure, frequent headaches, chronic pain, difficulty sleeping, and poor mental health. Additionally, there is often a need for medical assistance, housing, victim advocates, legal advice, and crisis hotline services (National, 2011).

Adults are not the only ones who suffer in cases of domestic violence. Children exposed to abuse are more likely to struggle with both physical and mental health issues, truancy, eating disorders, substance use, and suicidal ideation. Children in homes where abuse is present are 15 times more likely to be physically abused and neglected. The single best predictor of whether a child will grow up to be a perpetrator or victim of abuse later in life is growing up in a home where domestic violence was present (Childhood, n.d.).

Sadly, Christian homes are not immune to abuse. In fact, women of faith are more likely to conceal the abuse and stay in the marriage longer than women who do not claim a faith connection. They are also less likely to reach out to industry experts for assistance. Households of faith are more likely to use religious texts to keep victims in line, and often have stricter gender role expectations. Despite the presence of abuse within congregations, few pastors have received domestic violence training, and few recognize it as a problem in their own congregation (Lifeway, 2018).

Stepping out in faith

Here are some “first steps” to consider before your congregation engages in a ministry for domestic violence victims:

- Domestic violence is a widespread issue. Understand that victims and survivors are already attending your church.
- Listen to the victims and believe them. False reports are rare.

- Present resources, but do not make decisions for them.
- Make use of safety planning.
- Connect victims to the local family violence shelter.
- Help the victim get to safety when ready to do so.
- Continue to be a support system for victims. Victims need crisis care but will likely also need long-term, ongoing support.

What this ministry might look like in your church

- Provide domestic violence training for church leadership, or even the whole congregation.
- Provide training on trauma-informed care for church leadership.
- Know the difference between toxic and healthy relationships and make this a point of conversation in small group meetings at all age levels.
- Get to know your local family violence shelter.
- Display brochures about abuse in visible spaces around the church, and in places where there is less visibility – such as the women’s restroom.
- Know about the local resources for victims of abuse.
- Talk about abuse, neglect, and toxic behavior from the pulpit.
- When preaching about marriage add disclaimers for abuse.
- Know that if women are being abused, likely the children are as well.
- Understand that couples counseling is contraindicated when abuse is present.
- Know that prayer and submission will not end abuse.
- Provide support for victims.
 - Financial support from the benevolence fund.
 - Practical support in the form of assistance from church members.
- Know that few abusers produce lasting change.
- Require full accountability for abusers.
 - Forgiveness does not require reconciliation.
 - True change takes years of dedicated work.
 - The abuser must take personal responsibility and observe boundaries.
 - Require batterers’ intervention courses.
 - Support restraining orders.

Goals of the ministry

The goals of a coordinated effort by clergy and congregations to respond to the issue of domestic violence include creating safer communities, offering a faithful response to victims, and seeking to help break the cycle of domestic violence in families. This is done through education and awareness, and the discussion of healthy and toxic relationship patterns in all areas and age levels of ministry. This would include prayers, sermons, and small group messages. It also may include hosting a domestic violence speaker or conference or providing space for survivor support groups. Ultimately, there should be multiple layers of effort by the faith community to engage with this topic.

Funding the ministry

The only regular expense involved in this ministry would be allocating or using benevolence funds to benefit victims. If available, additional funds could be used to bring in guest speakers and hold training events for the congregation or community.

Recruiting volunteers

Domestic violence is an issue that affects almost everyone. There will be multiple congregants in your faith community who have a friend or loved one who has been impacted by abuse, or who are survivors themselves. These individuals will often be more than willing to provide support for this effort, as will other congregants who desire to be involved with community efforts to end abuse.

Structure of the program

As stated above, response to domestic violence should be multi-layered. Clergy, church staff, and lay leaders should all be educated about abuse and trauma to provide appropriate assistance. This would ideally include statistical information, causes of abuse and how to recognize it, why victims struggle to leave, and ways that religion can both hurt and help. The topics of abuse and healthy relationships should be included in sermons and small group messages. Clergy should be familiar with local family violence shelters and other entities that support victims and hold abusers accountable. The congregation can also make brochures about abuse easily accessible, have a resource list available, and establish means of support, including financial assistance.

Promoting the program

By making brochures available, by including the topic of domestic violence in sermons and prayers, and by regularly communicating about healthy relationship dynamics in groups, your congregation would already be promoting this. Additionally, you could bring in guest speakers, hold training events for the entire congregation, promote related awareness months, and attend local events related to domestic violence. Taking these actions will also increase word-of-mouth promotion around your local community.

Program as evangelism

Historically, the Church has provided a mixed response to the issue of domestic violence. While some congregations provide support and assistance for victims of abuse, others have misused scripture to require a victim to stay in the abuse or have blamed the victim for causing it. Some victims have been excommunicated from their faith communities simply due to seeking safety from the abuse. When a victim's faith community uses sacred texts or religious pressure in this way, it heaps further harm upon the victim. However, when clergy and congregations are willing to be educated about abuse, are concerned with victim safety, and are willing to provide support for the victim and any children, those who have been abused can heal more completely. Serving victims of abuse is doing the work of the Lord. The Psalms communicate to us repeatedly that God is the stronghold for the oppressed and will comfort those who are suffering. God heals their broken hearts and binds their wounds. May we, as communities of faith, seek to be like God and do the same.

References

CDC. (2011). *National intimate partner and sexual violence survey: 2010 summary report*.

https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/pdf/nisvs_report2010-a.pdf

Childhood Domestic Violence Association. (n.d.). *What is the impact of CDV?* <https://cdv.org/what-is-cdv/the-impact/>

Lifeway. (2018). *Domestic and gender based violence: Pastors' attitudes and actions*.

<http://lifewayresearch.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/Domestic-Violence-Research-Report.pdf>

If additional information is needed, please contact [the Center for Church and Community Impact](https://socialwork.web.baylor.edu/c3i) for further conversation about how to use this in your congregation, or for a consultation on this topic.

<https://socialwork.web.baylor.edu/c3i>

The book *Congregational Social Work* by Dr. Diana Garland and Dr. Gaynor Yancey provides additional perspectives on social work within the congregational context.

Domestic Violence Policy Template

(You may use this model policy as a template to create your own church policy.)

[Church Name] is committed to maintaining a safe environment for victims and survivors of abuse. **[Church Name]** believes that all forms of abuse are wrong and incompatible with Christian character. We affirm that all are one in Christ - equal before God in dignity, worth, and value.

Domestic violence is defined as a pattern of behavior used by one partner to gain and maintain power and control over the other partner. This includes not only physical assault, but also verbal, emotional, sexual, financial, digital/electronic, and spiritual abuse, as well as stalking. When a spouse is being abused, it is possible that the children are also at risk.

We will seek to:

- [Church Name]** will protect those vulnerable to abuse from harm.
- Ensure that victims of abuse are connected to local resources.
- Provide support and assistance to victims, as needed.
- Speak of domestic violence from the pulpit, and in group discussions.
- Integrate conversation about healthy relationships in existing activities and groups. Create opportunities for survivors to share their experiences, if desired.

Our guidelines:

- [Church Name]** will respect the autonomy of the victim.
- We will avoid blaming or shaming the victim, or minimizing the abuse.
- We will assure confidentiality (within the limits of mandated reporting).
- We will report to the police or civil authorities, if necessary.
- We will know our limitations, and seek professional assistance as needed.

Scheduled training:

[Church Name] will hold (annual/biennial/other) trainings on the topic of abuse for staff/deacons/elders to ensure that all are educated on this topic.

Partnership with existing services:

- [Church Name]** will establish/maintain a relationship with a local family violence shelter. We will network with local agencies who provide services for victims of abuse.
- We will have a contact list of referrals for victims who seek assistance.
- We will seek additional training on abuse from local resources who offer it.
- We will support local advocacy efforts regarding domestic violence.

Clergy Signatures Here

Theological support for domestic violence policy.

God is a stronghold and comfort for the oppressed – Ps. 9:9; Ps. 103:6; Ps. 146:7-8
God binds the wounds of the brokenhearted – Ps. 147:3
God attends to our suffering – Ps. 22:24; Ps. 28:6-7; Mark 5:34
God is committed to justice – Ps. 33:4-5; Ps. 103:6
We are all equal before God – Gal. 3:28-29
Abuse is not compatible with the Christian faith or worldview – Eph. 4:30-32
Abuse is the opposite of the love we are to show – 1 John 4:7-8; Gal. 5:14
Abuse mimics an unclean heart – Matt. 5:19-20; Mark 7:20-23
Abuse mimics the acts of the flesh – Gal. 5:19-21
Verbal abuse is damaging – Prov. 18:21; Matt. 15:18; Eph. 4:29; James 1:26
Financial abuse/control/lack of provision does not show godliness – 1 Tim. 5:8
Child abuse denies that children are a gift – Ps. 127: 3-4; Matt. 18:6

Principles for creating a safe congregational environment.

There are many ways that clergy can communicate to congregants that their church is a safe haven for victims and survivors of abuse. These include both overt and covert methods to demonstrate a desire to protect and serve those who have been oppressed by abuse. Know that it is neither safe nor wise to attempt to provide support for both victims and abusers in the same congregation. Doing so puts the victim's safety at risk.

- Prioritize safety of the victims/survivors
- Take domestic violence seriously, and create a zero-tolerance policy on abuse
- Speak about domestic violence in prayers, sermons, and small groups
- Address abuse and control in pre-marital counseling
- Understand the role that gender inequality plays in abusive relationships
- Build on women's existing leadership, and promote new women to leadership positions
- Strengthen your relationship with local family violence shelters and organizations
- Display brochures about domestic violence in visible spaces
- Bring in guest speakers to talk about abuse and/or host a domestic violence seminar
- Offer space for survivor support groups to meet in your facilities

Checklist for clergy

Do you ...

- Have a written policy on domestic abuse?
- Do you have procedures for handling abuse?
- Plan regular trainings for church staff/deacons/elders/entire congregation?
- Know your state's mandated reporting laws?
- Know about your local family violence shelter?
- Have brochures about abuse displayed in visible/less visible places at church?
- Include the topic of abuse in sermons, including adding disclaimers about abuse when preaching and speaking about marriage and relationships?

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