

In Theory: How should we address domestic abuse?

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Question:

In Glendale, 339 cases of domestic violence were reported to police in 2010. The department's latest figures, as of September of this year, are 238. But many women don't report assaults to the police, and others report them to organizations like the YWCA. With this in mind, the Safe Family Task Force, the YWCA of Glendale and the Glendale Religious Leaders Assn. are holding a workshop on Dec. 15 on family violence for local clergy members to attend. The workshop is designed to help clergy learn about domestic violence, what resources are available, and how to respond.

Paula Devine, the chair of the Glendale Commission on the Status of Women, said, "In 2005 the police had 422 reports of domestic abuse but the YWCA had more than 900. Domestic violence is a learned behavior — the abuser more than likely has experienced this violent behavior at home while growing up. Most women don't like to call authorities out fear of repercussions for reporting their partner and a feeling of shame for being seen as a victim of domestic violence."

Linda Pillsbury, a clinical social worker who is active with the Safe Family Task Force, said, "A lot of people can't understand why abused women don't leave the relationship. The truth is that leaving is the most dangerous time. If the abusive partner discovers the woman is planning on leaving, the violence may increase. The workshop will help clergy learn more about what domestic violence is and how to talk to victims. We're also hoping they can help spread awareness of it to their communities by speaking out in the pulpit."

Have you encountered victims of domestic violence in your work? If you have, did you know how to handle it? Can clergy play a role in ending domestic abuse?

Answer:

Having grown up in a family in which physical violence would have been unthinkable, my first real awareness of the horrifying and destructive reality of domestic violence in our communities was during my time in seminary in the mid to late '90s at the Claremont School of Theology in Southern California. There, I learned about this largely-hidden blight in several of my classes. Inspired to action by that awareness, I became a volunteer at Haven House, a women's shelter in Pasadena.

While there, I increased my understanding of the very real dangers to women in abusive situations. In fact, my first education as a volunteer was the reminder by staff that the address of the shelter must be kept confidential to protect the woman from those perpetrators of violence who might try to get to them there. At Haven House, I learned a great deal about the

subject of domestic violence and its effects on the lives of the women and children who lived there. And it was that experience, along with others, that encouraged me to return to Claremont to get a doctorate in pastoral care and counseling and ethics so that I would be better equipped to support the people, both women and men, who had been physically and psychologically wounded.

Knowing that domestic violence has no racial, ethnic, religious or socioeconomic parameters, I believe that those of us who are members of the clergy have a tremendous role and responsibility. We must bring this scourge out into the open for those we serve, as well as the larger community, and acknowledge that there are potential and actual victims in each of our congregations. We have a duty to reach out to those in our communities whom we believe to be the objects of battering and provide them with the support they need to escape from danger. And we must recognize that the psychological effects on both the battered women and their children may be even more long-lasting than the physical injuries.

I believe we are called to work together to make our people, our families, and our communities safe for all.

The Rev. Dr. Betty Stapleford
Unitarian Universalist Church of the Verdugo Hills
La Crescenta

So far, I have not encountered any domestic violence that I know of in my congregation. I have perhaps encountered the alleged abuse of seniors, and I am required to report such alleged abuse.

A minister is a mandated reporter, and as such, the minister is required to notify the proper authorities, who then do the investigation. Can clergy help to reduce domestic violence? Perhaps in a small way, but not in any meaningful way. We can quote the apostle Paul from the pulpit, and say, "Husbands, love your wives" (Ephesians 5:25), and then we could add, "Loving them means not beating them up!"

But domestic violence has roots in the offender's family; the wife-beater probably saw his own mother beaten by his father. So for the wife-beater, being violent is the right way to keep women in line because "my daddy did it."

Domestic violence is a huge issue that one sermon or one session will not correct. We can listen and we can make suggestions as to what the battered woman could do, but as of right now, I really don't expect much from the clergy in terms of ending domestic violence.

The Rev. Skip Lindeman
La Cañada Congregational Church
La Cañada Flintridge

I have dealt with a case of domestic violence. The wife brought the issue up to me, and after

prayer and counsel, I urged her to remove herself from the home and go to a safe house for battered women. As I recall, I believe she did, at least for a time. Her husband, a man who was clinically diagnosed with bipolar disorder, did not take that decision well. While I don't believe he attacked her because of her decision, he did leave a not-so-veiled death threat against me on our office answering machine. I never heard from him again.

Clergy can play an important role in ending domestic abuse. Jesus said, "you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free" (John 8:32). From both the pulpit and in personal counseling sessions, we can share the biblical truth that spouses should never feel they deserve to be abused. Marriage is a gift of God for the benefit of both husband and wife who demonstrate mutual care and self-sacrifice to each other. Clergy can, and should, refer couples to counseling professionals who believe God's word and who have more focused experience with domestic violence situations. And we should never forget the power of simply praying for couples in this situation. "The effective prayer of a righteous man can accomplish much," says James 5:16. God invented marriage, and he is on our side to help us when we desire to honor him in every marriage challenge we face.

Pastor Jon Barta
Valley Baptist Church
Burbank

I have only seldom been made aware of domestic violence. As the statistics show, most survivors of domestic violence do not inform others. It is an important responsibility of all community members to educate our neighbors about safe ways to expose violence. Permission needs to be given to everyone to help spread the word and expose domestic violence.

I think each case needs to be handled as a special case. Although some aspects of domestic violence can be repeated in different cases, in most ways individuals are different and situations are different.

Probably some important goals are to help individuals make the difficult choices they need to make. It is difficult to see what you can do when you are in a violent situation. So helping people see alternatives, and helping them feel empowered to make the best decisions that they can make for themselves, should be the goal.

Clergy and leaders can probably influence a reduction of domestic violence in the community. Both abusers and the abused need to feel they have alternatives. So both need to be encouraged to explore alternative choices. Abuse is not just an issue for the abused. There is another side of the equation that needs to be addressed. Abusers are part of our community and they need help in understanding their problem and how they can learn to treat their family members better.

So clergy and others need to promote problem-solving for members of the community. This holiday time is a good time to bring up the question because families are spending more time together, celebrating the joys and challenges of family. We all have a role in encouraging everyone to treat each other fairly, justly and with kindness.

Steven Gibson
South Pasadena Atheist Meetup
Altadena

Yes, unfortunately I have encountered victims of domestic violence, and I suspect that many of my colleagues have as well. Whenever I become aware of such a situation, my response generally depends on the level of abuse. In one instance, an enraged husband threatened his wife with a knife. In that particular case I immediately had the police remove her and their two-year-old child from the home, and had them placed in a secretive women's shelter. As scary as it sounds, such a case is relatively easy to deal with, since it represents an open-and-shut scenario of extreme spousal abuse; the situation is resolved by removing the victim from her abusive partner and convincing her to never go back.

What I find far more difficult to handle are the many unhappy situations where there are no overt threats or acts of physical violence. The majority of the cases that I've come across represent emotional abuse, where one party in the relationship mentally tortures the other, often in a cruel, relentless manner. This unbearable behavior can go on for many years, and generally it escalates as time passes. I've seen people who have remained in these types of relationships for 25 years or more, suffering each day, yet always hoping that tomorrow will be better. But it almost never is.

I believe that the clergy can, and should, play a decisive role in ending domestic abuse. Whenever these poor, hurting souls come to us for help, we must, first and foremost, be understanding and compassionate. Second, we need to identify with the victim and empower her to seek the refuge and assistance necessary to break free from the heavy chains of oppression and move ahead in life. This is often the most difficult step, since the abuser is often manipulative and conniving, and starting an independent life presents challenges of its own.

On this Thanksgiving weekend, as we spend time with family, friends, and loved ones, let us remember all those who suffer in silence. Let us resolve to never tolerate the perpetrators of domestic abuse or ignore its victims. As a community, in unison, we must commit ourselves to obliterating this scourge from our midst.

Rabbi Simcha Backman
Chabad Jewish Center
Glendale

I intend to attend the abuse workshop. I would like to know what to look for, what to do and where to turn. I say that, admitting that my only experience in two decades of ministry has been something unusual. Meaning, most reports of abuse concern men taking advantage of the weaker sex (atrocious, certainly) but I'm privy to situations that came the other way 'round.

I know a man that had a jealous girlfriend. Twice she became so livid with unfounded concern

that she attacked him forcefully, with claws bared. His female friends and co-workers were so enraged at his obvious injury that they chided him for not giving her a good “what-for.” Ethically raised that a man never hits women, the option seemed unavailable to him. But come her second attack, he backhanded her and she fell to the floor. She arose with tearful apology, and it never repeated. Who was the abuser?

A second situation was when a couple I married scuffled over his inordinate computer time. She shut off the power box. He went to switch it on, and she remained to prevent him from doing so. When he finally restrained her, she bit him so hard that it left teeth marks and a hideous bruise. It should have ended before that, but it continued as he informed the police. Apparently, the law says that whoever causes injury goes straight to jail.

She received a felony record, depleted her family’s funds in defense, and the marriage ended instantaneously. How absolutely horrible!

Then there’s that case (that we all know) where an immigrant wife sneaked up on her sleeping American husband and vengefully emasculated him. Who was the abuser, the emotionally detached husband, or the wife with a knife? Both? Hmmm.

God commands husbands to love their wives, and wives to respect their husbands (Colossians 3:18-19). These gender-specific needs are seldom obeyed today — so there you are. Abuse is a sin issue and it’s not gender-specific. All I can do as a pastor is play interference and say, “What would Jesus do?”

The Rev. Bryan Griem
Montrose Community Church
Montrose

I have encountered domestic violence as a pastor. It is one of my specialties as a Christian psychotherapist.

Clergy can, and must, make a difference from the pulpit. However, what I have sadly seen in some incidents is that it is not handled — perhaps from lack of knowing exactly what to do. What I also have witnessed on many occasions is that it makes people uncomfortable. They either do not believe the victims, do believe the perpetrators, or go into denial of how bad it really is. I can state this, as I have had that experience in my past. This is one reason why I advocate for victims of domestic violence and make myself available to the Victims of Crime program for counseling.

Individuals and families need to know they have rights, that violence is illegal, and that in many cases, the government will help with therapy bills.

Pastors can help immensely by raising public awareness, teaching about domestic violence, and making the support of the church known so people feel safe and confident to come for help.

Victims often are afraid to turn the perpetrator in. They do not have the information and

support they need to get out of the situation. I find myself speaking and writing on this topic often to advocate for those who are physically and emotionally being abused. This never is God's will. What can be a wound upon a wound is when people do not believe the victim.

Emotional abuse can be as painful as physical. "Emotional abuse includes such acts as name-calling, deliberate public embarrassment, isolating the victim from family and friends, controlling finances and so forth" (CDC, 2006). This affects a person's psyche. We must help people find support and know their rights when they are too beat down physically and emotionally to make decisions. But more than that, we all need to believe stories — those of our family, friends, people in our church, co-workers. We must not turn our backs on those closest to us. And clergy can lead by example. Because to ignore or not believe causes re-injury. And this can leave people hopeless.

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www.pasadenasun.com/news/opinion/tn-gnp-1125-domestic-abuse,0,5705454.story

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