

Responding to Domestic Violence and Spiritual Abuse

BY AL MILES

The victims and survivors of domestic violence and spiritual abuse frequently turn first to spiritual leaders and lay congregation members for refuge. Members of faith communities need to acquire the proper training to respond in an appropriate and effective manner.

According to national statistics, one in every four women will experience some tactic of emotional, physical, psychological, sexual, or spiritual abuse from a male intimate partner in her lifetime. The victims and survivors will frequently turn first to spiritual leaders and lay congregation members when seeking refuge. Often times, however, these key individuals in the life of the women are ill-prepared to respond in an appropriate and effective manner.

Here are a few practical steps to encourage members of faith communities to consider.[†] First, *make the safety of a victim-survivor and her children top priority*. This is a vital first step. Often spiritual leaders and congregation members express the desire to “save a marriage” and “keep a family together.” These goals, however, should only be considered after a perpetrator has gone through an offender-specific program, after there is reasonable certainty that his abusive behavior has completely stopped, and only if the victim-survivor wishes to continue in the relationship.

Second, *hold the abuser accountable*. A perpetrator of domestic violence rarely takes responsibility for the destruction he causes. Instead he will blame alcohol and other drugs, children, job stresses, mood swings, Satan, and, especially, the very woman he is violating. Members of faith communi-

ties need to be cautioned to not get taken in by an abuser's slick and manipulative ways. They must also be encouraged to resist the notion that no self-professed "man of God" would use violence and other abuse tactics to control his wife or girlfriend.

Listen to and believe a victim's story. Always thank a victim-survivor for the courage and trust she demonstrates by sharing her story. Tell her that there is no excuse or justification for domestic violence. Refrain from asking for more details about the abuse than what a victim-survivor volunteers, especially if you are a male and there has been any act of sexual violence. Also, never ask a victim-survivor why it took her so long to disclose the abuse or why she stays with her abuser. These questions could appear as though the victim-survivor is being blamed for her own victimization.

Do not recommend or participate in couples' or marriage counseling. It is a common but dangerous mistake to suggest that a battered woman and her partner or husband seek couples' or marriage counseling. Domestic violence is *not* about men and women struggling as a couple. It is about the conscious decision of one partner, usually the male, to use abusive and violent tactics to maintain power and control over his female intimate partner. Couples' or marriage counseling is inappropriate and risky in these situations, and it could lead to further abuse or even the death of a victimized woman.

Do not facilitate couples' or marriage counseling, even when abuse is not occurring or suspected, without having appropriate qualifications. Many Christian clergy and lay leaders admit to not having the proper credentials, education, or licensing to be considered as a couples' or marriage counselor. This requires a high level of skill and training most clergy and lay ministers do not possess. Nevertheless, a number of spiritual leaders and laity engage in what is called "Christian counseling." It is prudent that we either obtain the necessary education and training to meet the standards of the counseling profession, or make referrals to those individuals who have already achieved this level of competence.

Accompany a victim-survivor to court hearings. The presence of spiritual leaders and laity, upon the request of a victim-survivor, at child-custody or protection-order hearings provides much-needed support to the battered woman and indicates to the entire community that we condemn domestic violence. This is true whether or not we are being asked to offer testimony.

Do not accompany batterers to court hearings. Men who hurt their female intimate partners will often ask Christian clergy and lay members of a congregation, especially other males, to accompany them to court hearings to "speak on their behalf." The alleged offenders are most often seeking our collusion. While we have a responsibility to provide spiritual care to perpetrators as well as victims-survivors, Christian leaders *and* laity must take extra caution as to not be manipulated. We should not participate in any actions that help violators escape accountability and justice.

Maintain healthy boundaries. No single person, not even individuals who

have worked against sexual and domestic violence for decades, has the knowledge and training to deal alone with all the complexities associated with these pervasive problems. Members of faith communities and all others seeking to help victims and survivors must therefore not go beyond their level of training. Otherwise, we will end up causing more harm than good and might even further endanger the lives of a victim-survivor and her children, and even our own lives. To be most effective, spiritual leaders and lay congregation members need to partner with and make referrals to community service providers: advocates, batterers' intervention specialists, child protective services providers, crisis intervention counselors, law enforcement officers, legal professionals, shelter workers, and victim and witness assistance personnel, to name just a few. In addition, we all need to take added caution so as not to foster an emotionally dependent or sexual relationship with a victimized woman. Bear in mind, a victim-survivor is very vulnerable.

Help a victim-survivor to establish a safety plan. Spiritual leaders and church members can assist a victim-survivor by helping her establish a safety plan that can be implemented quickly should her husband's or boyfriend's abuse continue or escalate. Include in this plan a safety kit, kept in a place where the perpetrator will not discover it, that contains items such as cash, a change of clothing, toiletries, an extra photo identification card, copies of her children's birth certificates and childhood immunizations, and a list of phone numbers of counselors, friends, pastors, physicians, and shelters. It bears repeating: although spiritual leaders and laity can offer vital assistance to a victim-survivor in the area of safety planning, we must always work with a team of community service providers to offer a victim-survivor the best possible opportunities for safety.

Be wary of modern day technology and telephone landlines. Computers and cell phones are not safe ways to communicate with victims and survivors. Often, offenders have placed spyware on an abused woman's computer. This enables him to track the woman's emails, and her Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and other accounts. Similar tracking devices can easily be installed on cell phones. Even telephone landline communication is not safe because these conversations can also be tapped. When speaking with a victim or survivor by either cell phone or landline, be very general. But

To be effective in helping victims-survivors and perpetrators of sexual and domestic violence, spiritual leaders and lay congregation members need to partner with and make referrals to community service providers.

instead, whenever possible, meet with an abused woman in person.

Finally, *seek education and training*. If members of faith communities are to take a vital part in helping victims-survivors and perpetrators of sexual and domestic violence, then it is essential that they seek proper and ongoing education and training. We must keep updated on the articles, books, videos, and workshops that can help us become effective team members. Remember: even with this training never try to care for a victim, survivor, or batterer alone.

Victims and survivors of domestic violence and spiritual abuse are found in every segment of society. Some attend worship regularly; sing in our choirs, teach in our parochial and Sunday school classes, and preach from our pulpits. So do their offenders. Christian pastors and congregation lay members need to acknowledge this harsh truth and acquire appropriate education and training in order to help address these epidemics that are devastating individuals and destroying families.

NOTE

† I treat these matters in further detail in *Domestic Violence: What Every Pastor Needs to Know*, second edition (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2011); *Violence in Families: What Every Christian Needs to Know* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2002); and *Ending Violence in Teen Dating Relationships: A Resource Guide for Parents and Pastors* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress Press, 2005).



AL MILES

is Lead Chaplain for Pacific Health Ministry serving at The Queen's Medical Center in Honolulu, Hawaii.