



When the silence is broken... prepared to listen

Guidelines for ministers and pastoral workers
in preparing to listen to someone living in a
violent relationship

part of the Dignity initiative



Preparing yourself as a minister or pastoral worker to help someone experiencing intimate violence

Introduction

This is a specialist field, and unless you have professional experience or have worked in this field before, you will need to learn new pastoral skills, which may also challenge and stretch your theological understanding.

‘Intimate violence’ can mean different things. This particular leaflet is focussed on violence against women, where the violence may take various forms, but is an abuse of power and control in an intimate relationship. Much of what is said may also be relevant where the silence is first broken regarding earlier childhood abuse, or violence against a man, so a range of resources and contact numbers can be found on the back page.

It is always difficult to decide to trust someone enough to speak, whether the abuse is immediate, happened some time ago, whether a woman or a man.

Whatever the circumstances, the following principles and guidelines apply.

What you need to do

- ✚ Learn what you can about domestic abuse
- ✚ Find out who to turn to locally
- ✚ Find someone who can support you (another minister, counsellor)
- ✚ Know where to find appropriate prayers to use
- ✚ Build a climate in your church in which all forms of abuse, including violence, are resisted

Key points to remember in meeting with a victim

- ✚ Believe her
- ✚ Take her story seriously
- ✚ Tell her it was not her fault
- ✚ Acknowledge her courage in telling you
- ✚ Be aware that she or her children may be in danger
- ✚ Remember any choices or decisions are hers
- ✚ Stay alongside her
- ✚ Keep calm
- ✚ Accept your own limitations
- ✚ Give her time and space

- ✚ Assure her of confidentiality
- ✚ Pray with her only if she asks or if she freely agrees.

Believe her

She has come to you for help. She has dared to trust you. You may be the first person she has told, or she may have tried confiding in others who have not believed her. She may tell you horrific stories about someone in your church whom you know, and so you find it hard to believe what you are hearing - remember that you only know his public face, not the private person. Each side of him is real, but context is everything. You cannot judge his private behaviour on the basis of the public person you see.

Take her story seriously

What she tells you may seem horrific or it may not seem much to you. You cannot judge the impact the abuse has had on her, whether it is a slap, or marital rape. There may be more she has not yet told you: she may be testing to see whether she can trust you.

Tell her it was not her fault

No intimate relationship is ever without its problems. Nothing, however, justifies violence. The one she has loved and trusted is using his greater power (physical, economic, verbal, emotional) to wound, humiliate, and demoralise her. Violence is against the law. It can never be right, especially in a Christian marriage.

Acknowledge her courage in telling you

She already suffers from low self-esteem, may feel guilty at telling family secrets, and blame herself for the violence. Her partner may have isolated her from her friends and family, and deprived her of money, including the freedom to make phone calls so that she is more fully in his power. She has taken a brave step in coming to see you.

Be aware that she or her children may be in danger

She may be suffering one or many forms of violence. Over time, the violence may increase in intensity, or change its form, so that her life is threatened, or that of a child or pet.

Any choices or decisions are hers

She may not be clear about what she wants, only that the violence should end. She is highly vulnerable. She may submit to your "authority" and accept any advice you may give her. Be aware of your power in this situation, and how careful

you must be. Don't pressurise her into any action she doesn't want. She must decide what is right for her to do. Your role is to let her know the available options, and help her to achieve her goal whether you agree with it or not.

Stay alongside her

If she decides to go to the police, or to a refuge, or to return to the relationship, do not regard that as the end of the matter for you. She will still need support, and maybe a place of safety for the future. She may not be able to name her need in a strange environment (eg at a police station): encourage her, but resist the temptation to speak for her. Whatever she decides now, she may change her mind later. Go with that too.

Keep calm

You may be shocked by what she is telling you, but it does not help her if you show it, or she may feel that you are angry with her for letting all this happen. Accept all she is telling you whatever you are feeling. Remember though, that you need to protect yourself as well. If you cannot bear her story for your own personal reasons, tell her you are not the best person to help her, and ask another person whom you trust to talk with her.

Accept your own limitations

Victims and survivors of abuse and violence need professional help. Few ministers or pastoral workers are trained and accredited counsellors. Find someone who will work with her, which may be through the NHS, or a local counselling service. If the woman's partner is a minister, she has access to the Ministerial Counselling service operated by BUGB. The Association of Christian Counsellors will put you in touch with the nearest ACC accredited agency. Even if you are a trained counsellor, ask yourself whether it is advisable to mix professional and pastoral roles. Enabling someone to work through the deep trauma of intimate abuse takes time and skill, and may be a long journey. She will need wide support on her emotional and spiritual journey, as may the family. This is easier if the boundaries are clear. The skilled helper will also need his or her own professional support in supervision.

Give her time and space

She will not find it easy to talk. The resolution to the problem and her own healing may take a long time. Don't rush her. She must stay in charge of the process and its timing although you may set goals as time goes on. She must feel safe. Meet her in a neutral place (eg at the church) in a room that is not too small, but bright and comfortable. Don't sit too close to her. Do not touch her, even if you want to squeeze her hand or put a comforting arm around her shoulders. If you are a man, make sure that a woman is within call, and that she knows this.

Assure her of confidentiality

She needs to know that her story will not become common gossip around the church, and particularly that you will not go straight to her abuser. Do not discuss it with anyone, not even your partner. The exception to this is when you become aware that a child is at risk from abuse (whether physical, emotional, sexual or neglect) when you have to say that you must seek further advice from the appropriate agency (Social Services, or Police Family Unit). However, you will need your own support, so you must tell her that you are sharing what she has said with a trusted person, or a supervisor.

Pray with her only if she asks, or freely agrees to it

She may be angry with God, and feel lost and abandoned. There is no quick spiritual fix through prayer or the laying on of hands - to do either would be to perpetuate the abuse. Your time with her will be underpinned by your own personal prayer. Her spiritual journey may be a long, hard struggle. You will need a good knowledge of each cycle of abuse and the way it affects women, and to reflect on it from a theological perspective to equip you to help her.

What about the perpetrator?

One of the hardest situations pastorally is when both victim and perpetrator are known to you as members of the church fellowship. You may be shocked by what you have heard and find it hard to believe. You may also feel both anger and grief. When the victim has come to you, your pastoral responsibility is to her.

You must not talk to a perpetrator about what you have heard in an attempt to bring about reconciliation. Such a move, however well-intentioned, is an act of betrayal of someone who has put her trust in you. To talk to a partner would be to place her at risk.

It is well known that perpetrators will minimise what has happened as a one-off occurrence, or as a gross exaggeration of a 'reasonable' or 'normal' disagreement, or as a hysterical invention of an emotionally disturbed individual. It would be so easy to think that this is the truth. Perpetrators who are members of the church fellowship and even respected church workers are no different from others in this respect. It is also known that on average, women do not speak of abuse until up to thirty incidents have taken place, and that they are at the greatest risk when they first summon up courage to speak to someone, or make an attempt to leave. It is also easy to say that this is something they must talk through and sort out between themselves. But by the time someone has talked to you, this is dangerous advice.

Only when you know that she is safe, and that further action is possible, and you have her permission to speak, can you act. Once other agencies become involved, some action may be essential. The perpetrator may need an advocate, but that must not be you. You may have to find someone who can take on this

role. It may be necessary to suspend the perpetrator from any office or area of responsibility he holds in the church and to stay away from the church fellowship. The victim should not feel that she is the one who has to leave the church.

There are organisations to help perpetrators face up to, and acknowledge responsibility for their actions and work for change. Change is not easy: responsibility is often denied and change resisted. Agreement to work for change may only come as a part of a court ruling or condition of probation. True repentance will recognise the need for change, the need to place a partner’s well-being before their own, and to be prepared to accept that this may bring about life changes that are not what the perpetrator may have wished. This may include moving from the family home, seeing the children in supervised access, giving up church responsibilities, worshipping in a different fellowship.

Resources

To equip you to help her, there are some beautiful liturgies and prayers that have been written by and for victims. There are also resources to help men who are facing domestic violence. There are many books, which are helpful in raising awareness. Your church might support you on a training course for ministers and pastoral workers, either through the local Domestic Violence Forum, or your Regional Association.

Contact numbers

Freephone National 24-hour Domestic Violence Helpline	0808 2000 247
Scottish Women’s Aid	0800 027 1234
Men’s Advice Line and Enquiry	0808 801 0327
Action on Elder Abuse National Helpline	0808 808 8141
NSPCC	0808 800 5000
Respect National Helpline for perpetrators or professionals seeking advice	0845 122 8609
Samaritans	08457 90 90 90

Local Phone Book

Women’s Aid and Refuge services
Citizens’ Advice Bureau

Other leaflets available include:

For Churches:

- CH1 *It doesn't happen here*
- CH2 *The Dignity Coalition Church Charter*
- CH3 *Notes to accompany the Charter*

For Survivors:

- S1 *Breaking the silence... wanting change*
 - * Add leaflets from your own locality for appropriate services

For Ministers:

- P1 *When the silence is broken... what does the law say?*
- P2 *When the silence is broken... prepared to listen*
- P3 *When the silence is broken... marriage... where do you stand?*
- P4 *Why do women stay? Towards a spiritual understanding*
- P5 *What churches need to know about pastoral support for abusers*
- P6 *Agencies which may be able to help*

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