

Commentary: How to respond to domestic violence from the pulpit to the pew

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“It is not an enemy who taunts me – I could bear that. It is not my foes who so arrogantly insult me – I could have hidden from them. Instead, it is you – my equal, my companion and close friend. What good fellowship we once enjoyed as we walked together to the house of God.” —Psalm 55:12-14

We have long known that domestic violence exists, affecting one in three women in Texas. There are no racial, ethnic, socioeconomic, educational or age-related boundaries when it comes to abuse—nor is it defined by religious affiliation.

Domestic violence is a worldwide epidemic, and in order to end it, we need to understand that it affects all of us, including those within the church and within your congregation.

Faith communities are often the first responders for those experiencing domestic violence, as many people turn to their faith for answers before seeking support or counseling outside of their place of worship. Unfortunately, leaders and members of the church are often ill-equipped to know how to respond to abuse or don't think it happens within their own congregations.

The truth is that women in faith communities are at a higher risk of being abused, less likely to leave the abusive relationship and least likely to reach out to experts for help.

Although the faith community may have the best intentions in responding

to domestic violence situations, too often, victims hear blaming or are given advice that unintentionally perpetuates the abuse and excuses the abuser. Abusers may manipulate scriptures like Ephesians 5 or Proverbs 31 to keep women in abusive homes for fear of displeasing their God.

Given the escalation patterns and potentially lethal nature of domestic violence, it becomes an even greater responsibility for all intersections of the faith community to respond effectively by turning to the experts, establishing a church-wide commitment against domestic violence and actively taking an individual stance by getting involved.

Rely on the experts

The church is not immune to secular problems like alcoholism or domestic violence. Considering that domestic abuse is the leading cause of injury to families, all faith communities—including both leaders and members—need to be prepared to face this issue. We cannot ignore it when it happens, nor can we pretend it doesn't happen in our church.

To end this epidemic, the church isn't expected to be an expert on the issue, but rather to stand beside victims, believe them, tell them there is help and hold abusers accountable.

There are resources available like [Genesis Women's Shelter & Support](#), an organization that exists to give women and children in abusive situations a path to lead independent and safe lives. They are the experts so you don't have to be, providing staff trainings and materials on how to respond to domestic violence from the pulpit to the pew.

Establish a church-wide commitment

against domestic violence

We are called to hold abusers accountable: if you suspect something, say something.

The Bible says again and again, “Whoever has ears to hear, let them hear.” Suppose the news of the gospel was only talked about at church once a year; imagine the missed opportunity. Similarly, domestic violence shouldn’t only be discussed one Sunday a year during October for Domestic Violence Awareness Month.

In order to truly make an impact, the church needs to be blanketed with this message, from informational cards in the women’s restroom to sermons on Sunday and in Sunday school classes. If you don’t know where to start, Genesis Women’s Shelter can help determine the best ways to reach your congregation.

For a woman to hear and believe that she is worth it, she must receive the same message everywhere she goes — Genesis, the police, the courts and from her faith community.

Take an individual stance by getting involved

Understanding the intersection between faith and domestic violence is the first step in responding effectively. At Genesis, we recognize the incredible opportunity and responsibility we have to partner with faith communities to support our mission. With this in mind, we have launched the Genesis [Faith Community Coalition](#).

The Faith Community Coalition’s mission is to unite and mobilize faith communities to respond effectively to domestic violence by spreading

awareness and providing resources. Our hope is to see congregations and leaders join Genesis in recognizing abuse within the faith community and standing up on behalf of survivors.

If we ever hope to end the epidemic of domestic violence, we can't ignore it when it happens, and we can't pretend it doesn't happen in our church. Both abusers and victims are in our choirs, in our pews and in our congregations.

If you or someone you know is experiencing domestic violence, call Genesis' 24-hour hotline at 214.946.HELP(4357) or visit GenesisShelter.org for more information. If you'd like to discuss ways your congregation can take a stand against domestic violence, please reach out to me at 214-389-7709 or email jlangbein@genesishshelter.org.

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