

A BROKEN

Talking about the epidemic of domestic violence

When Lisa* moved to a new town in 1994, she vowed not to tell anyone about her past. She wanted people to know her and love her for who she was, not who she had been, or who she had been with. People assumed she was divorced, and she didn't correct them.

But her carefully constructed mask began to crumble last summer at Triennial XIII, the Covenant conference for women sponsored by Women Ministries. "They kept talking about taking off the masks," Lisa says. "There were 2,000 women raising their hands and singing about how Jesus can mend broken vessels; I grabbed on to the woman on each side of me and just sobbed and sobbed and sobbed."

Finally, Lisa took off her mask with the friends who had accompanied her to Triennial. The truth: she had spent ten years married to a dangerous, abusive man, whose violent and untimely death was probably the only reason she was still alive.

Lisa didn't have the dysfunctional childhood some people mistakenly

associate with victims of abuse. The granddaughter of a Covenant pastor, she grew up in a small town in rural Wisconsin where most of the people in her church and school were relatives. Her family and faith community loved her and guarded her vigilantly against negative influences—too vigilantly, perhaps. "I was completely naïve and gullible," Lisa admits. "No matter what anyone said to me, I just believed them."

So when she went off to college and met Robert, a fun, attractive, and charming man who had just gotten out of the Marines, she believed everything he said. "All the indications were there that he was not good husband material. But back then I was really insecure and had a very low opinion of myself. He made me feel good because he kept telling me what he needed to say to make me feel good. He always knew what to say to get what he wanted out of me."

Lisa and Robert married, and it didn't take her long to realize that she had made the biggest mistake of her life.

"Early in our marriage, there were

wonderful times—camping, canoeing, picnics," Lisa says. But Robert was an alcoholic whose drunken binges were accompanied by horrible violence. "For ten years I lived in terror of my husband. The abuse was violent: it was sexual, including rape, it was physical, and it was emotional," she says.

"We lived the classic abuse cycle. He'd sober up and be remorseful, buy me new clothes, make me candlelight dinners. He'd cry and say he'd never do it again, and I chose to believe him. For a while, everything would be happy—we'd go skiing, travel, have picnics. But as time would go on, he'd start getting edgy, start pacing, and I'd start getting nervous. He'd say he had to go out to the post office or something like that, and he would be drunk for days."

As the years went by, the abuse got worse, and Robert's remorse faded. Somehow Lisa carried on, working at a school to support her husband and

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TRUST



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their son, since Robert was unable to hold down a job. She would do her best to camouflage her bruises, and beg rides to work when Robert would disappear with the family's car.

"How I did it was incomprehensible," Lisa says. "I'd get up in the morning and go to work—black eye, fat lip, most of the time no sleep. I would walk into the teachers' lounge, and the conversation would just stop."

Although Robert only became physically violent when he was drunk, alcohol was not to blame for his abusive behavior. "One day I was lying in bed, and he sat down next to me, completely sober," Lisa recounts. "He must have known I was thinking about leaving. He looked me in the eye, held my chin, and said, 'If you ever take my son away from me, I will murder you, I will murder your family, and I will go to the end of the earth to get him back.'" Lisa had no doubt that his threat was real, and she never attempted to escape her husband.

Robert's violent tendencies eventually turned on him, and he died from injuries sustained in a bar fight, widdowing Lisa and leaving her to raise their five-year-old son alone. Lisa was distraught, but family and friends who knew them have little doubt that if Robert hadn't been killed, he would have eventually killed Lisa. "There is no logical reason that I should be alive today, other than the prayers of my mother," Lisa admits.

Unfortunately, Lisa's story is not as uncommon as we might like to think. According to the National Institute of Justice and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, one in four

American women will experience domestic violence in her lifetime. An estimated two to four million women are injured by their partners each year, with 1.3 million seeking medical attention. Of people who abuse their partners, 30 to 60 percent abuse the children in the household as well. Just witnessing abuse, however, is enough to cause children serious psychological damage and increases the likelihood that the cycle of abuse will continue into the next generation.

Sexual abuse is often involved in domestic abuse as well, occurring in 40 to 45 percent of relationships where battering occurs. In America, one in four girls have been sexually abused by the time they turn fourteen, and one in six boys by the age of eighteen, usually by someone they know. Nearly 7.8 million women have been raped by a boyfriend, husband, or significant other at some point in their lives. According to estimates from the U.S. Department of Justice, fewer than half of all rapes are reported to the police, and only one out of twenty rapists ever spend a day in jail for their crimes.

Perhaps most shocking is the fact that these statistics aren't much different among churchgoers. While the idea that a startling percentage of the people who worship alongside us are going home to endure or inflict psychological, physical, or sexual

violence is hard to swallow, Nancy Nason-Clark and Catherine Clark Kroeger back up this claim with a wide variety of research, studies, and statistics in their book *No Place for Abuse: Biblical and Practical Resources to Counteract Domestic Violence*.

In fact, the main difference may be that Christian women are less likely to seek help than women from secular backgrounds. Too often, Scripture has been twisted and misused as a means of control and justification



for sinful behavior instead of as the living, breathing word of God. Many of these women suffer in silence and shame because they have been taught that anything other than complete submission to their husband is contrary to God's will, even when the husband's behavior is decidedly ungodly. Not only is their husband against them—God and the church seem to be, as well.

But the Bible consistently states that God is on the side of the oppressed, the abused, the downtrodden, and the brokenhearted. And



WHEN CHURCHES ADDRESS DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

increasingly, the church is becoming more vocal in its defense of victims of domestic violence and in providing support for them.

In 2003, Covenant Women Ministries approved a three-year initiative to raise awareness about domestic violence and childhood sexual assault within the church, and to advocate for victims of abuse. Eight years later, Advocates for Victims of Abuse (AVA) has become a crucial part of the ministry of the Covenant Church, with a regional coordinator in every conference, and the visionary goal of having an advocate in every local church.

“My vision is to create healing communities and safe sanctuaries,” says Yvonne DeVaughn, the national coordinator of AVA. “What we’re trying to do is provide resources that help victims heal and equip the church to minister to them.”

AVA advocates are trained to address issues of domestic violence and childhood sexual assault as they come up in the church, providing biblical counsel and encouragement to the victim, and linking them to the services that already exist in the community, such as women’s shelters and counseling centers. They also help educate the clergy and church members about how to understand and address domestic violence in their congregation.

“Domestic abuse is a pattern of assaultive and coercive behaviors that adults or adolescents use against their intimate partners—those patterns can include control, isolation, threats, and violence,” DeVaughn says. “The common denominator [for abusers] is that it’s about having power and control over another human being. It’s not about anger management—often you see that the person can manage that anger when they’re in other social situations. It’s not about drugs, alco-

Domestic abuse is one of the primary causes of homelessness among women, with an estimated 50 to 60 percent of homeless women fleeing violent living situations. Barbara Certa-Werner, executive director of Harbor House Crisis Shelters in Superior, Wisconsin, addresses this issue on a daily basis.

“I think there are a lot of myths out there about who a homeless person is and what they do,” Certa-Werner says. “The people Harbor House serves are women and families. It’s sad for me to know that there is a mom with an infant having to sleep in her car. That’s not what Christ has called us to.”

Certa-Werner believes it is crucial for churches to begin talking about domestic violence. “As followers of Christ, we need to find out about what’s going on in our communities, so we can go out there and begin to effect change. I think that pastors need to preach on domestic violence. I would also pose the question, how many congregations have had a Bible study about an issue that’s out there—homelessness, hunger, domestic abuse? Once you find out what the Bible says about that issue, you can go out in biblical strength, better equipped to address those issues.”

Harbor House grew out of just such an initiative, when members of Faith United Methodist Church decided to put their faith into action by converting their parsonage into a shelter for homeless women and children. They later expanded, purchasing another house and an apartment building to create two shelters and a transitional living facility. The impact has been huge.

“One of the things that gets me excited is that a lot of the people who come to the shelter have never experienced God’s love, and we are the first ones to actually show them that,” Certa-Werner says. “I can’t even begin to tell you how many people have had their lives changed, not instantly, but over time, because we were in their lives. I’ve seen women get their bachelor’s degrees, get their children back. I’ve seen women who

have never had a job find jobs, get apartments, get married—just tons of stuff. It really does make a difference.”

While many churches donate to women’s shelters, organizing mitten drives and the like, few congregations get involved on a personal level, building relationships with the women and children who live there. This is especially unfortunate, because many shelter residents were forced to leave their family, friends, and support systems behind in their search for safety. Mittens are appreciated, but a hand to hold can be even more meaningful.

It’s not just women who are hurting. “Last year, of the 458 people we served here at Harbor House, 50 percent of them were children,” Certa-Werner says. “A lot of the children come in lacking life skills that are needed. They are attending one, two, or three different schools in a year—we get some children who have moved around so much, they’ve never gone to school. They’re in fifth grade, and they still don’t know their letters.”

Certa-Werner emphasizes the need for consistent commitment. “One of the saddest things for me to see is that at Christmas, everyone wants to adopt a family, buy them presents, things like that—but what about the other eleven months of the year?” she says. “What about when the kids need underwear and school supplies, or when they need swimming suits, so they can be like the other kids?”

Although the needs are great, ordinary congregations can make a big difference, as Faith United Methodist Church has shown.

“What’s needed is for the church to stand up and say that domestic violence is inexcusable, that there’s no reason for someone to be hungry, or homeless,” Certa-Werner says. “There are a lot of good people who aren’t Christians, and if you ask them why they’re engaging in these issues, they’ll say they don’t know. But we’re doing this because of what Christ did for us. That’s it. No one should not have a place to stay; a place to live, to be safe, and feel that they are loved.” ■

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hol, genetics, biology, out-of-control behavior, or stress, or all that—the root of it is about having power and control over another human being,” she says.

“A lot of times what we hear is that people tend to blame women,” talking about some well-intentioned attempts to “fix” the problem from the woman’s end, DeVaughn explains. “If she would be a better woman, if she’d just cook and have his food there, if she’d give him sex, if she’d do this and that, these things wouldn’t happen. The implication is that she’s provoking the abuser to anger, when it has nothing to do with that. The victim needs to be reassured that it’s not her fault, she’s not the cause of the violence. She needs to be told that

abuse isn’t God’s will for her.”

On the other extreme, some people criticize women for staying in abusive situations. While their intent is to encourage the woman to find safety, all too often their words pile the shame, blame, and responsibility back upon the victim.

“Through the years I have heard many comments about women who stay with abusers,” Lisa says. “‘Why does she stay with him?’ or, ‘How dumb can a person be to get into a relationship with that kind of man?’ or, ‘No man would ever lay a hand on me more than one time.’ People may not mean anything hurtful with these comments, but when I hear them, it sets me back to a point where I vow once again to never tell what has hap-

pened to me.”

People who pressure women to leave abusers are often unaware of or underestimate the perils the women are facing. “That’s the most dangerous time for a woman, after she’s left the abuser,” DeVaughn says. “That’s when women are killed. Sometimes, being safe means she’s going to have to go back. It takes the average woman seven tries to successfully leave her abuser.”

Safety isn’t the only concern. Many women doubt their ability to provide for themselves and their children if they leave. Some worry about the psychological impact leaving the father will have on their children, especially if the children are not being directly abused; others are terrified that they will lose custody or agonize over their stepchildren. Women are reluctant to burn bridges with family members or in-laws, and fear being ostracized or

HOW YOU CAN HELP

If someone you know is suffering from domestic violence, here are some helpful dos and don’ts.

Do believe the victim, and listen without judgment. Let her know that you are concerned for her, and that God does not want her to be abused.

Don’t suggest that she try to appease the abuser by changing her behavior. The violence is the abuser’s fault, not hers.

Do make the victim’s safety a top priority. Help her connect to resources for battered women in the community, and make sure she knows the number for the National Domestic Violence Hotline: (800) 799-SAFE (7233). You can also help her create a safety plan at CovChurch.org/women/ava.

Don’t suggest that a victim stay in a dangerous situation for spiritual reasons. It’s tragic when a marriage ends in divorce, but even more tragic when it ends in severe injury or murder. The abuser has already broken the marital covenant with his behavior.

Do pray with the victim and help her wrestle through her spiritual concerns. AVA created a booklet called *You Are Not Alone: A Book of Prayers and Meditations for Women* that addresses

common concerns Christian women have when they are living in or escaping from abusive situations. (The booklet can be ordered at CovenantBookstore.com, along with several helpful brochures produced by AVA. Consider keeping several copies in the women’s restrooms in your church.)

Don’t tell the victim what to do or insist that she follow your advice. You may not know the full extent of what she is dealing with. It is crucial that you respect her decisions, even when you disagree with them.

Do help the victim connect to resources in the community, such as counseling services, economic support, and women’s shelters, as needed.

Don’t suggest couples counseling. While individual counseling for both the abused and the abuser may be helpful, couples counseling tends to escalate the emotional and physical violence occurring in the home, and can be extremely dangerous for women.

Do encourage and support the victim through her journey.

Don’t abandon, isolate, or give up on the victim.

cut off from their community. And victims often love the person who is abusing them, and mourn the loss of relationship when it ends, even if it isn't healthy.

"There's so much shame, there's so much blame, there's such a sense of failure," DeVaughn explains. "Congregations need to put their arms around these people and support them; help them restore their marriage if it's possible, and if it's not possible, walk with the victim as they mourn the loss of their marriage or relationship."

Ultimately, one of the most important things churches can do is acknowledge that the problem exists, and choose to support the victims in their church and in their community, loving them, helping them, and sharing Jesus's love with them. Ephesians 5:11-14 says, "Take no part in the unfruitful works of darkness, but instead expose them. For it is shameful even to mention what such people do secretly; but everything exposed by the light becomes visible, for everything that becomes visible is light."

For Lisa, deciding to break the silence with her friends at Triennial changed her life forever. "It is very frightening to tell secrets like this one, because you never know how people will react, and once the words are out, you can't take them back. But I had been told that talking about this, with people I can trust, would help me heal. And it's true! I feel like the chains have been broken. I am a new creation after this. It is amazing."

As we begin to break the silence about domestic abuse in our churches and community, and allow the bright light of God's truth to shine on what is actually taking place in our homes, healing can begin to take place, and we, illuminated by God's grace, can become more and more of a light to our broken, hurting world. ■