



I Believe You: Faiths' Response to Intimate Partner Violence

Note for the facilitator

Discussions about intimate partner violence are never easy. Please read through this entire discussion guide before hosting a discussion session. It is important to know the questions you will be asking so that you can anticipate possible responses.

As facilitator you are not expected to answer every question. The best way to answer any question is to have resources available to refer participants to. Have a pastor or counselor available should a participant need to speak with a professional. In addition, have a separate room or space for participants who need a space to be alone. Allow participants to answer questions voluntarily—do not go around the table or call on anyone for answers.

Before beginning, covenant with one another to make sure discussion occurs in a safe, sacred space where confidences are kept. Create guidelines that ensure a safe environment, one in which words come from the heart and include no accusations. Decide together what a safe space means. As facilitator, be prepared for a response if someone breaks the covenant.

By hosting this discussion you're taking an important step in raising awareness about intimate partner violence and helping victims of it.

Discussion suggestions

This discussion guide is designed for small groups of United Methodist men and women. It is based on chapters of the 58-minute documentary *I Believe You: Faiths' Response to Intimate Partner Violence*. Facts and quotes at the beginning of each section are taken from the documentary.

The leader is invited to play one chapter of the DVD at a time. After viewing the chapter, read one or more of the quotes from the chapter along with any facts or statistics. When asking a question, provide ample time for participants to think about it. Assure them that there are no wrong answers, as everyone's experiences will be different. If no one responds, feel free to begin with your own experiences, insights or opinions. It is up to the leader to decide how many chapters the group will view and discuss at any one time.

The documentary was produced by Diva Communications with the support of the New York Board of Rabbis, United Methodist Women, Presbyterian Women, the Evangelical Church in America, Odyssey Networks, the National Council of Churches and a consortium of Muslim organizations. The program was funded in part by grants from the Burnam Family Foundation, Nora Gonsler Trust, Justice for Women and Women's Ministries-ELCA, the National Council of Churches, Presbyterian Women and PADVIN, United Methodist Women and Odyssey Networks. The documentary aired on ABC television network affiliates from January–March 2011.

“The Abuse”

One in four women will experience domestic violence in her lifetime.

I was told that whenever my husband got angry it was my fault. It was something that I did to anger him, to upset him.

—Survivor

It was two weeks into the marriage I was picked up and thrown across the room in a rage.

—Survivor

My uncle, a minister, told me God did not intend for you to be abused and that meant a lot to me.

—Survivor

You also know someone [who is a victim of abuse] even as you know that you don't know.

—The Rev. Dr. Marie M. Fortune
Founder of FaithTrust Institute

Discussion questions

- Do you know someone who has been in an abusive situation?
- Without betraying any confidences can you tell us something about that person?
- How did you come to know about the abuse?
- What did you say in response to the person?
- What did you do?

“It’s Only Physical”

Some 3.3 million American children witness abuse in their homes every year.

He was handsome, brilliant, and fabulous, but he was a controlling bastard. ... It's amazing the way you can be broken down. I thought my husband was criticizing me for my own best interests.

—Survivor

There is a temptation to think that domestic violence is physical violence. That's just one of a number of ways that one can look at domestic violence. It can be spiritual, it can be economic, it can be sexual. It's the threat of what may happen. It's a way of saying you can't be in charge of your own destiny.

—The Rev. Willard Ashley
Director of field education for the New Brunswick Theological Seminary

Discussion questions

- If one of the marriage partners controls all the finances and refuses to let the other know about them, is this abuse?
- Can constant criticism feel constructive?
- Can a “look” be emotional abuse?
- If a husband refuses to let his wife and children attend church, is this abuse?
- If a husband demands that his family study Scripture for two hours a day, is this abuse?

“Why Women Stay”

Estimated annual U.S. health care costs for domestic violence is \$4.1 billion.

I thought I could change him. I wanted to bring back the guy I’d known since the third grade that had these dreams, these goals.

—Survivor

I thought I had done something to heighten his behavior. Maybe I wasn’t the perfect wife. Maybe dinner wasn’t perfect. Maybe I wasn’t making enough money.

—Survivor

Women ask themselves, *Did I do something? Did I say something? Maybe if I’d done something different. Maybe if I just keep the children quiet. Maybe if I looked prettier. If I lost some weight.* This begins a cycle where women begin to blame themselves for what has happened.

—Nancy Nason-Clark

Founder and director of the RAVE (Religion and Violence E-Learning) Project

Just the sheer statistics would tell us that the people we know are affected by intimate partner violence—not just people we don’t know.

—Harriett J. Olson

Deputy General Secretary

Women’s Division, General Board of Global Ministries
of The United Methodist Church

Discussion questions

- Rabbi Diana Gerson says it takes a woman three to seven attempts before she is able to extricate herself from a relationship. What are the reasons behind this delay?
- If a woman has positive experiences with a man while dating and that relationship changes after marriage, is she likely to think she is at fault?
- Can constant criticism feel as if it is out of love and concern?
- Can control appear gentle and kind?
- Does the myth that good Christians or good Jews don’t abuse people hinder their ability to get help?

“Our Holy Text Hijacked”

The Center for Prevention of Sexual and Domestic Violence reports that rather than offering resources and alternatives to battered women, pastors, priests and rabbis have often advised women to return to violent homes and be “better wives.”

The first two pastors were very condescending to me as a woman; they quoted Bible passages saying I took vows that I could not break, that I had no options, I had to go back.

—Survivor

By no means is it appropriate in any way, shape, or form for the church to say to the woman, you have to endure this, that is your role because that’s not the scripture. That’s not the good news.

—The Rev. Steve Davis

Discussion questions

- Should pastors address the problem of domestic violence from the pulpit?
- What did Paul mean by saying, “Wives, be subject to your husbands as you are to the Lord” (Ephesians 5:22) or “Wives, be subject to your husbands as is fitting in the Lord” (Colossians 3:18)?
- Paul also commanded, “Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself for her” (Ephesians 5:25) and “Each of you, however, should love his wife as himself, and a wife should respect her husband” (Ephesians 5:33). What kind of a relationship was Paul proposing?
- To what extent was Paul reflecting first century culture?
- Is leaving an abusive situation a breaking of the marriage vows?

“Reflections on the Past”

In the United Methodist Church, adjudicating cases of sexual misconduct by clergy has cost \$100 million in the past 10 years alone.

A rabbi said I should go home and tell my husband I love him and make dinner. Over a period of time that if you take the time and every day say that you love him, that, yes, things will change.

—Survivor

Historically Christian clergy have not been sympathetic to women that come from domestic abuse situations because the abuser may hold a powerful position in the congregation. So the clergyperson decides not to jeopardize that person’s power and not do justice to a family.

—The Rev. Willard Ashley

Discussion questions

- How many sermons have you heard on domestic violence?
- Is this an appropriate topic for the pulpit?
- In some cases the suffering these women endure is taught as a redemptive and necessary part of the Christian journey. The ability to suffer becomes an opportunity for salvation and redemption as a way to be more Christ-like. Is this a helpful response?
- Christian women want to stay in marriages, and some feel they have failed if they get a divorce. How can the church affirm the sanctity of marriage and still encourage a woman in an abusive situation to seek a divorce?
- The United Methodist Church states, “While we deplore the actions of the abuser, we affirm that person to be in need of God’s redeeming love.” Are there ways in which the church should hold the abuser accountable and yet offer the person care, support or counseling?

“Beginning Steps”

During the first five years of the Iraq war, 4,000 U.S. soldiers were killed in combat. During those same five years, more than 6,000 Americans were killed by intimate partners.

It took a lot before I could get to the point where I could actually tell anyone in leadership what was going on.

—Survivor

That day he kissed me probably more passionately than he ever had before and he said, “I’m going to work and I’m coming back in two hours and I’m killing you.” He said, “Get up and get in there and get a shower because I want you clean for this.”

—Survivor

Domestic violence affects women both inside and outside of faith communities. In the faith community, we carry a special burden to make sure our communities are open to the issue and are part of the solution for our members as well as nonmembers.

—Harriett J. Olson

At the center we have shelter, we have a 24 hour crisis line, we have GED classes and we started working with a core group of kids when they were in the sixth grade on teen-dating violence. We have two staff attorneys and an assistant to provide legal representation for divorces, for protection and child-custody cases.

—Marsha Hutchason

Director of domestic violence victims’ services
of the Susanna Wesley Family Learning Center, East Prairie, Mo.

Discussion questions

- What kinds of help would a woman need who considered showering in order to be clean when her husband would come home to kill her?
- For women: As a teenager, were you ever in a situation where a boy insisted on having sexual relations as a sign that you loved him?
- Can men be victims of domestic violence?
- Have you ever had to control yourself from hitting a disobedient child?
- Do you know a caregiver of a person with dementia? Can you understand the frustration of that caregiver and how this could result in abuse?
- Should the church care for persons outside their faith community who are in abusive situations? How can that care take place?

“A New Day”

One-third of high school and college age persons either know someone or are in an abusive relationship themselves.

The combination of a safe place, adequate food, thinking about the future, and the ways that make it possible to think about a different future. Dealing with our emotional scars and seeing ourselves as a valued spiritual participant in our own lives. All are part of what it takes to provide a family through a period of violence and to see a new future.

—Harriett J. Olson

I believe I have made the right decision to be placed in a direct-service agency as a clergy person to address intimate-partner violence when I see 14-year-old girls come into First Step for a sexual assault nurses exam.

—The Rev. Diane Smalley,
Chair, Domestic Violence Work Group, Presbytery of Detroit

Whoever said that this could have happened to me, I would have laughed in their faces.

—Survivor

Discussion questions

- How can we teach young girls to say no?
- Where and with whom do young boys learn the proper respect for women? Who taught you?
- How well trained are clergy and laity in church leadership positions in intimate-partner violence?
- What shelters and resource centers are available in this community?

“I Believe You”

More than three women and one man are murdered by their intimate partners in the United States every day.

It is hard when you are already struggling with so much fear and shame—all the feelings that you go through to have someone just put their arm around my shoulders and say, “I believe you,” was huge.

—Survivor

You don’t realize how dark a situation you are in until you come out, and then you say, “My God, what did I just go through?”

—Survivor

When someone comes forth with their story, they are giving you a precious, fragile gift. And you need to affirm that you believe—that you hear their pain. The amount of pain you hear always trumps for me whether someone would be making this up.

—The Rev. Ann Tiemeyer

Program director Women’s Ministries, National Council of Churches

Discussion questions

- The Rev. Ann Tiemeyer says that the amount of pain she hears always trumps questions about whether the story is true. How should we respond if we honestly doubt the veracity of someone’s claim of intimate-partner abuse?
- Is there danger in interceding in an abusive situation?
- If you know both partners, and one is claiming abuse, can you avoid taking sides?

“Healing”

Domestic violence is an equal-opportunity employer—it cuts across all racial, ethnic, religious and social lines.

It’s not enough to say, “I hear you, that’s really too bad.” It’s important to say, “I believe you and it should have never happened to you. It was wrong what the person did to you.” That is the beginning of healing.

—The Rev. Dr. Marie M. Fortune

I wish I could say I was one of those people who would like to go forward, to open up the eyes of the people in my church, but I’m wearing a disguise so I wouldn’t be recognized and I haven’t told you the name of my church because I’m so afraid of the repercussions for me and my children.

—Survivor

It took many years before I said anything to anyone at church. It took a lot before I could tell anyone what was going on. I was pleasantly surprised that they received it well and they believed me.

—Survivor

Discussion questions

- How does domestic violence affect spirituality? How can spirituality help the healing process?
- The Jewish community offers an immersion in water as a symbol of cleansing and the beginning of a new life. What type of experience could be used in the Christian community?
- How can we help an abuse victim believe that she has done nothing wrong?

“Moving Forward”

In 2010, the Commission on the Status and Role of Women has fielded 40 complaints of alleged sexual abuse against women, children and men by United Methodist clergy and laypersons in church leadership roles.

You just have to get this straight: walk away.

—Survivor

I feel like God gave me the freedom. He said, “You tried every way to make this work. You honored your vows. You honored me in all that you did and said through this and you are now free.”

—Survivor

What is important for us as bystanders is that we look with open eyes and open ears to hear those voices.

—The Rev. Dr. Marie Fortune

Discussion questions

- What can we learn from women who have moved from being victims to being survivors?
- What steps can be taken in our congregation to enable victims of intimate-partner abuse to be loved and find healing?
- In what ways can United Methodist Women and United Methodist Men help create an environment where people feel free to be honest?

To help

Share information and resources with victims so that they can make the best decisions for themselves. Walk with a victim—listen, believe, affirm, care for safety, provide education and wait to follow their lead in choosing what to do next. Here are some links to help:

Understanding safety issues

First response: www.ncadv.org/protectyourself/GettingHelp.php

Helping a friend or family member:

www.thehotline.org/get-educated/how-can-i-help-a-friend-or-family-member-who-is-being-abused

Help for clergy

Clergy and people of faith need to respond to domestic violence. For training and resources go to www.faithtrustinstitute.org.

Family Violence Prevention Fund resources

www.endabuse.org/content/features/

Teen dating violence

www.pcusa.org/resource/2009-domestic-violence-congregational-packet/

Faiths' response to domestic violence

Jewish: Jewish Coalition Against Domestic violence at jcada.org or

Jewish Women International at www.jwi.org

Christian: National Council of Churches at www.ncccusa.org/womensministry/domesticviolence2.html

Muslim: Peaceful Families Project: www.peacefulfamilies.org

Additional assistance

If someone you love has been killed by domestic violence, include him or her in the “Remember My Name Project” to continue to raise awareness and help future victims:

www.ncadv.org/programs/RememberMyNameProject.php

Cosmetic and reconstructive surgery for victims of domestic violence:

www.ncadv.org/programs/CosmeticandReconstructiveSupport.php

Discussion guide developed by Richard Peck
in collaboration with
General Commission on United Methodist Men
P.O. Box 340006
Nashville, TN 37203-0006
615-620-7276



United Methodist Church statements on domestic violence

The Book of Discipline of the United Methodist Church, 2008

¶161 II. The Nurturing Community

The community provides the potential for nurturing human beings into the fullness of their humanity. We believe we have a responsibility to innovate, sponsor, and evaluate new forms of community that will encourage development of the fullest potential in individuals. Primary for us is the gospel understanding that all persons are important—because they are human beings created by God and loved through and by Jesus Christ and not because they have merited significance. We therefore support social climates in which human communities are maintained and strengthened for the sake of all persons and their growth. We also encourage all individuals to be sensitive to others by using appropriate language when referring to all persons. Language of a derogatory nature (with regard to race, nationality, ethnic background, gender, sexuality, and physical differences) does not reflect value for one another and contradicts the gospel of Jesus Christ.

G. Family Violence and Abuse

We recognize that family violence and abuse in all its forms—verbal, psychological, physical, sexual—is detrimental to the covenant of the human community. We encourage the Church to provide a safe environment, counsel, and support for the victim. While we deplore the actions of the abuser, we affirm that person to be in need of God's redeeming love.

162 III. The Social Community

The rights and privileges a society bestows upon or withholds from those who comprise it indicate the relative esteem in which that society holds particular persons and groups of persons. We affirm all persons as equally valuable in the sight of God. We therefore work toward societies in which each person's value is recognized, maintained, and strengthened. We support the basic rights of all persons to equal access to housing, education, communication, employment, medical care, legal redress for grievances, and physical protection. We deplore acts of hate or violence against groups or persons based on race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, religious affiliation, or economic status. Our respect for the inherent dignity of all persons leads us to call for the recognition, protection, and implementation of the principles of *The Universal Declaration of Human Rights* so that communities and individuals may claim and enjoy their universal, indivisible, and inalienable rights.

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