



Domestic Violence: The Church's Responsibility



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Foreword by Pastor B.L. Toliver, Th.D.

I requested that available material be compiled prayerfully and diligently to address the issue of Domestic Violence for Progressive Church of God in Christ elders and lay leaders. This study, *Domestic Violence: The Church's Responsibility*, was carefully researched and thoughtfully written to focus our attention on a problem often overlooked in the Christian community. It was not written to be an indictment or point the finger of blame at anyone. It is to merely call our attention to the problem and offer suggestions for dealing with it.

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Section 1: Introduction

The purpose of this document is to equip the Body of Christ, especially the clergy, both male and female, with knowledge of and appropriate responses to church members experiencing Domestic Violence (DV). The discussion is also intended to help ministers recognize the signs of family violence and, where possible, prevent it.

The California Women's Health Survey for the year 2000 reported 41% of women (4.39M) experiencing physical domestic violence at some time in their life. From 1998-2001, approximately 5-6% of California women reported experiencing physical domestic violence over the previous 12 months. Domestic violence and unique circumstances exist within the context of a particular community of color, common factors and considerations exist which may account for under-reporting of domestic violence by women of color and a failure to seek appropriate help services.

The prevalence varies by racial/ethnic group. The following statistics are according to National Intimate Partner Violence and Sexual Violence Survey (NISVS). 9.5% of Black women had been stalked; 41.2% had been physically abused by a partner during their lifetime; and 31.8% have experienced sexual violence by an intimate partner. Between 21%-55% of Asian & Pacific Islander women have reported experiencing intimate physical and/or sexual violence during their lifetime. 51% of Native American/Alaska Native women experienced intimate physical and/or sexual violence during their lifetime. Physical and sexual violence are experienced by white women at 30.5% and 28% respectively.

Nationally, an October 2009 report from the U.S. Department of Justice found that Black women were twice as likely to be killed by their spouse, and four times more likely to be killed by a boyfriend or girlfriend, than white women. Despite their high rates of domestic violence, Black survivors are disproportionately more likely to be criminalized by the legal system.

The consequences of physical and psychological abuse can be long-lasting. A 1990 Ford Foundation study found that 50% of homeless women and children were fleeing abuse. The U.S. Conference of Mayors survey found that 46% of cities identified Domestic Violence as a primary cause for homelessness. When a woman leaves an abusive relationship, she often has nowhere to go.

Victims of Domestic Violence incur chronic and injurious assaults. Victims receive multiple forms of medical care that involve ambulance services, ER care, and hospital stays. In 2002, 25,000 ER visits in California were for women seeking treatment for injuries resulting from intimate partner abuse. Another researcher found that 17 percent of pregnant women report being abused during pregnancy. Physical abuse during pregnancy increases risk for miscarriages, pre-term deliveries, low birth weight babies,

and fetal fractures. Other studies reported that pregnancy complications for battered women may involve low maternal weight gain, severe nausea or vomiting, kidney or bladder infection, or antepartum hemorrhage.

Psychological consequences may result in smoking and substance abuse, both known to be injurious to the unborn fetus. Health consequences for the infant include intrauterine growth retardation, preterm birth, low and very low birth weight, and increased admission to neonatal intensive care.

God admonishes the Church to address injustices and social issues. **God** commanded His people to “Hate evil, love good; establish justice in the gate [court or community]” (Amos 5:15) and “...let justice run down like water, and righteousness like a mighty stream” (Amos 5:24). The Church has a moral and biblically supported responsibility to address issues like Domestic Violence both in the church and in our communities. This document seeks to assist faith leaders in adhering to this call.

Section 2: What is Domestic Violence?

Domestic Violence (DV) or Intimate Partner Violence (IPV) is anything in a marriage, premarital or intimate relationship that involves controlling the behavior, actions, or thoughts of the spouse or partner by belittling, name calling, destroying objects, withholding finances, food or sex, or physical abuse. Physical abuse is slapping, kicking, punching, shoving, restraining, forcible sex, with or without the use of objects or weapons. California law defines Domestic Violence as the infliction or threat of physical harm against past or present adult or adolescent intimate partners, and shall include physical, sexual, and psychological abuse and is part of a pattern of assaultive, coercive, and controlling behaviors directed at achieving compliance or control.

Domestic Violence is about power and control. The abuser does everything to maintain power and control in the relationship. Domestic Violence often occurs in cycles. Couples experience long periods of peace and honeymoon-like interactions. Then tension builds and usually the victim attempts to appease the abuser by complying with his or her wishes. Eventually, a Domestic Violence incident occurs in any manner as described above. Following the incident, especially when physical abuse occurs, the abuser expresses extreme sorrow, promising that it will never happen again, but tends to blame the victim with statements like “You made me so angry” or “If you had not done...” The couple returns to the honeymoon phase after the abuser apologizes and does many acts (buys flowers, gifts, and may even promise and go to church) to appease the victim; but this change is not lasting. In these explosive relationships, the intervals between honeymoon phase and tension grow shorter and shorter until there is constant violence.

Recognizing Domestic Violence (*taken from 1-800-VICTIMS*)

Domestic violence often becomes a pattern made up of three stages.

A. Tension-Building Phase

1. Batterer may: pick fights, act jealous, be possessive, be critical, yell, swear, use angry gestures, coercion, threats, be moody or unpredictable, or drink or use drugs
2. Partner may: feel like they are walking on egg shells, afraid, anxious, try to reason, act calm, appease the batterer or keep silent, or try to keep the children quiet

B. Violence-Crisis Phase

1. Batterer may: verbally, emotionally, or physically abuse, sexually assault, restrain or threaten partner, or destroy property
2. Partner may: experience fear, shock, use self-defense, try to leave, call for help, pray for it to stop, or do what is necessary to survive

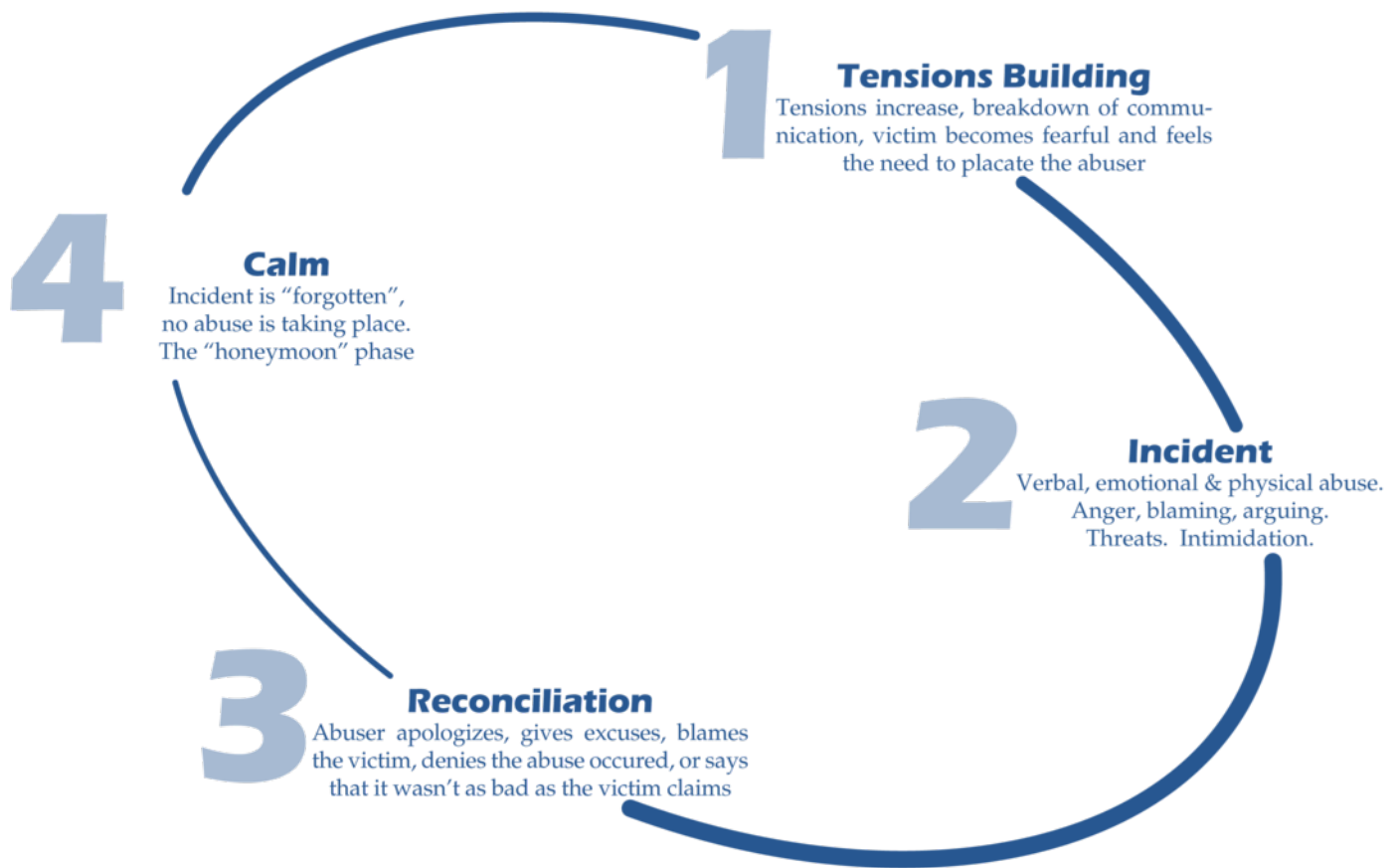
C. Seduction-Calm Phase

1. Batterer may: apologize, minimize or deny abuse, ask for forgiveness, be affectionate, promise it won't happen again, promise to change, or give gifts
2. Partner may: forgive, feel hopeful that the abuse will stop on its own, feel manipulated, blame self, arrange for counseling, return home, or minimize or deny the abuse

Three dynamics (love, hope, and fear) keep the cycle in motion and make it hard to end a violent relationship.

- Love for your partner: "The relationship has its good points, it's not all bad."
- Hope: "The relationship will change; it didn't start out this way."
- Fear: That threats to kill you or your family will be acted upon.

Cycle of Abuse



Section 3 The Impact of Domestic Violence on Children

Infants and children are often directly involved in violent domestic incidents. They are held as a shield by the mother, hit by thrown objects, or intentionally threatened or hurt to terrify the mother. Even when they are apparently lying passively in their cots, infants are exquisitely sensitive to their surroundings and especially to the emotional signals given out by their caregivers, including the caregiver's depressed, anxious, fearful or angry mood."

Cortisol is a steroid hormone that is released in response to stress (4). Research on the link between cortisol levels and attachment (bonding) status shows a contrast between securely and insecurely attached infants. Raised levels of cortisol is a normal response to stress in humans. Caregivers of infants provide a 'buffering' that reduces cortisol production. Secure babies are therefore less affected by stress. Insecure infants have elevated cortisol levels even after mild stressors (Gunnar & Barr, 1998). It is as if these babies have been "primed to be reactive," what has been described as hypervigilant, that is always on the lookout for danger. As they grow up, this may be protective for children living with violence, but it means they are hyper-reactive, oversensitive to the possibility of danger. In other settings, such as school, this may make them inclined to be aggressive in readiness to defend themselves and therefore unpopular with classmates.

Another thread that runs through the research literature is the impact on the child of the meaninglessness violence they witness or experience. No one talks about what is happening. The abused may dissociate from the violence, go into denial, so that when it is happening, he or she may act as if there's nothing wrong. Following domestic violence incidents, the abused often continues life as usual without explanation. Both the abused and the abuser may act as if nothing has happened. So, the child's thoughts and feelings about the violence become fragmented, disorganized and they are unable to make sense of it (McIntosh, 2000). However, the violence affects the way child witnesses see the world and themselves, their ideas about the meaning and purpose of life, their expectations for future happiness, and their moral development. Children exposed to violence have a greater likelihood of seeing the intentions of others as hostile. Witnessing domestic violence can disrupt children's progression through age-appropriate developmental tasks (Margolin & Gordis 2000; p.445; p.449).

California law identifies children witnessing Domestic Violence as a form of child abuse and neglect. In certain cases, children can be removed from the home where violence occurs. Most often both abuser and the abused do not see the children as being harmed by the violence, but once they come to an understanding of the harm will work toward making changes.

Section 4: What the Bible Says About Domestic Violence

In his book, *Intimate Partner Violence in the Black Church: Bridging the Gap Between Awareness and Policy Development*, Dr. Carlos Jermaine Richard, provides interesting, but not surprising data from The Religion and Violence e-Learning Project (RAVE) about Intimate Partner Violence and women in the church.

- 95% of women say they have never heard a specific sermon on abuse
- 58% of women have helped an abused woman and 25% have offered the victim a place to stay for a night
- 69.8% of women have looked for help in regard to family matters or related circumstances from other church members
- Most pastors don't consider domestic violence or sexual abuse essential to larger religious topics

The Bible says plenty about domestic violence. We choose to ignore, don't recognize as such, and fail to make the application. Plainly speaking, if God is against violence, it goes to reason that He is against domestic violence. Unfortunately, many Christian counselors, pastors, and lay leaders are woefully ill equipped to handle this very important issue. Many ignore the correlation, especially teachers and preachers of the Word of God.

Understanding what the Bible says about faith issues that relate to domestic violence is a key step for any churches engaging in this area.

In the Bible, all violence is considered an offence against god and against humanity. Abuse is always sin. Abuse of authority or power (even legitimate God given authority) is always sin. Scripture is clear and full of condemnations of violence – time and again violence is associated with wickedness and condemned as “detestable to the Lord” (Psalm 11, Proverbs 3 & 10).

In particular, **violence against women is condemned**. In Jewish law, rape was viewed as equivalent to murder (Deuteronomy 22:26), as was pressuring a woman physically (Deuteronomy 22:25–27) or psychologically (Deuteronomy 22:28–29) into sex. The Bible recounts many stories of the horrific sexual abuse of women. In Old Testament narratives, rape is viewed as an “outrage” (nebalah) - a term which only occurs 13 times in the Old Testament and is reserved for extreme acts of violation against God and human beings, including the rapes of Dinah (only daughter of Jacob), Tamar (daughter of King David), and the woman of Bethlehem in Judges 19.

We never see the word “abuse,” in the Bible, but the term “**oppression**” (meaning crushing or burdening someone by the abuse of power or authority) is everywhere. The Psalms, in particular, portray oppression in a manner that echoes the way abuse survivors describe their abuser:

His mouth is full of cursing, deceit, and oppression;
Under his tongue is harm and injustice. (Psalm 10:7, NASB)

God is on the side of the oppressed and abused (Psalm 56). The scriptures clearly express God's desire for a dramatic transformation of society for those who are burdened, marginalized, or unjustly treated (Luke 4:18-21; Proverbs 14:31; Matthew 9:13; Mark 3:4-5).

Jesus refuses to play by the rules of violence and power (Isaiah 42:3, Matthew 26:52, Mark 10:41-45). This new revolution—modeled by Jesus himself—means that the powerful should give up their privilege to the vulnerable, the abuser should stop using violence against those powerless to resist, and the institution should stop ignoring the trauma of the abuse survivor.

The way of Jesus calls us to relationships of non-violence and peace. We are to resist using violence even in retaliation for violence used against us (Luke 6:29). This does not mean a capitulation to the inevitability of violence, but the promise of a day when those who continue to pursue violence will be dealt with (Romans 12:17-19; Revelation 22:12-15).

God set forth the permanence of the marriage relationship, but that does not include violence (Genesis 2:18, 21-24; Malachi 2:16; 1 Corinthians 7:4; 13:4-5; Ephesians 5:21-22; 25-31; 6:4; 1 Peter 3:7). God's covenantal design for marriage is broken by abuse, and Scripture does not mandate that an abused wife must remain married to an abuser; therefore, the body of Christ is called to model God's compassion toward abused women through effective strategies designed to meet the needs of women who are trying to escape abusive relationships. Pastors and church leaders need to have biblical responses for victims of domestic violence who feel trapped in the predicament of how to obey God and yet preserve their very lives.

The Church should be a refuge, a safe haven for women and men fleeing domestic abuse. It can do more and be out front in its response to intimate partner violence. The first step is people feeling safe in our church. From there, we reach out, speak out, help out those who need our support.

Section 5: 8 Biggest Mistakes Churches Make About Domestic Abuse

This is taken from an article by national certified counselor and licensed clinical professional counselor, Lynette Hoy.

1. Thinking that no one is being victimized in the congregation
2. Not believing the victim who reveals abuse and control issues in the marriage or intimate relationship
3. Breaking confidentiality and putting the victim at risk for harm
4. Confronting an abuser without regard for the safety of the victim
5. Believing that your church doesn't need to be educated about domestic violence or that education will actually cause more harm
6. Neglecting to help a victim of abuse
7. Teaching a wrong emphasis of headship and submission
8. Scolding the victim for returning to an abusive relationship

Let's admit it. We, as Christians, can say some of the dumbest things. So, regarding intimate partner violence, we definitely want to pray and think before we open our mouths. Ask the Lord to give us what to say, how to say it, and just as important, what not to say. We don't want to make the situation worse. More than anything we need to hear the victims, listen to them compassionately, and believe what they say. Please give the victim the benefit of the doubt. It is difficult enough for them to admit the situation they are in.

Section 6: What can the Church do to prevent Domestic Violence?

A BOLISH THE SILENCE. Create and nurture a church environment where the abused can be honest about what they are experiencing behind closed doors.

Recognize and accept the fact that spousal abuse is against the law! Domestic Violence Laws and associated penalties can be found at [California Family Code section 6203](#), California Penal Code [Penal Code section 273.5](#), [Penal Code section 243\(e\)\(1\)](#), and others.

Legal consequences of Domestic Violence include, but are not limited to incarceration, fines, and having children removed from the home. Children exposed to Domestic Violence is reportable by mandated reporters, including clergy.

Teach healthy relationships in sermons and Bible lessons.

So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them. God blessed them, and God said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it” (Genesis 1:27-28a NRSV). *(In Hebrew manuscripts the word translated humankind in the NRSV or man in the KJV is gender neutral, thus “humankind” is a better translation.)*

Wives, be subject to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord. Husbands, love your wives and **never treat them harshly** (Colossians 3:18-19). *(Emphasis added.)*

In the same way, husbands should love their wives as they do their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. For no one ever hates his own body, but he nourishes and tenderly cares for it, just as Christ does for the church,... Each of you, however, should love his wife as himself, and a wife should respect her husband (Ephesians 5:28-29, 33).

Recognize relationship violence early on in dating relationships. The following are signs of abuse:

The abusive partner

- abuses alcohol or other drugs
- has a history of trouble with the law, gets into fights, or breaks and destroys property
- does not work or go to school
- blames you for how they treat you, or for anything bad that happens
- abuses siblings, other family members, children or pets
- puts down people, including your family and friends, or calls them names
- is always angry at someone or something
- tries to isolate you and control whom you see or where you go
- nags you or forces you to be sexual when you don't want to be

- cheats on you or has lots of partners
- is physically rough with you (pushes, shoves, pulls, yanks, squeezes, restrains)
- takes your money or takes advantage of you in other ways
- accuses you of flirting or “coming on” to others or accuses you of cheating on him/her
- does not listen to you or show interest in your opinions or feelings...things always have to be done their way
- ignores you, gives you the silent treatment, or hangs up on you
- lies to you, doesn't show up for dates, maybe even disappears for days
- makes vulgar comments about others in your presence
- blames all arguments and problems on you
- tells you how to dress or act
- threatens to kill themselves if you break up with them, or tells you that they cannot live without you
- experiences extreme mood swings...tells you you're the greatest one minute and rips you apart the next minute
- tells you to shut up or tells you you're dumb, stupid, fat, or calls you some other name (directly or indirectly)
- compares you to former partners

As the victim,

- you feel afraid to break up with them
- you feel tied down, feel like you have to check-in
- you feel afraid to make decisions or bring up certain subjects so that the other person won't get mad
- you tell yourself that if you just try harder and love your partner enough that everything will be just fine
- you find yourself crying a lot, being depressed or unhappy
- you find yourself worrying and obsessing about how to please your partner and keep them happy
- you find the physical or emotional abuse getting worse over time

Do not minimize abuse or make excuses for the abuser. There is no excuse for domestic violence.

The Bible says in Ephesians 5:11-13,

And have no fellowship with the unfruitful works of darkness, but rather expose them. For it is shameful even to speak of those things which are done by them in secret. But all things that are exposed are made manifest by the light, for whichever makes manifest is light.

There are practical steps the church can take to demonstrate that it does not tolerate intimate partner violence.

1. Again, do not incorrectly use scriptures such as “*wives submit to your own husbands*” to perpetuate abuse.
2. Routinely screen church members (women and men) for signs of domestic violence. Put the individual at ease with statements, such as “I ask all families in my congregation a few questions about violence.” Assess the victim’s safety by asking questions. Ask directly, kindly, and non-judgmentally:
 - How do you and your husband get along?
 - We all have disagreements at home; what happens if you and your husband disagree?
 - Have you ever been harmed by him/her or felt afraid of him/her?
 - Do you have any guns in your household?
 - Have you (or your children) ever been hurt or threatened by your spouse?
3. Know the State laws about domestic abuse and enforce the legal responsibilities of the Church regarding domestic violence. A pastor's first responsibility is to protect the victim and her children from further abuse and violence. Making a report to law enforcement is, in many places, the legal responsibility of the pastor.
4. Provide referrals. Please go to the [Progressive COGIC Website](#) and navigate to the Progressive Christian Training Institute web page to find resources, curriculum, videos etc.

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