

A photograph showing a woman in a white bathrobe cowering in a corner, covering her face with her hands. A man's leg in blue jeans is visible in the foreground, looming over her. The scene is dimly lit, with a strong shadow cast on the wall behind the woman.

*Help...*

**Domestic Violence!**

**How should my  
church respond?**

# Help... Domestic Violence!

## How should my church respond?

**The church, and indeed any place of worship, should be a safe, non-judgemental environment where women, children and men exposed to domestic violence can find refuge and support**

Some church leaders have a good understanding of the issues and are well equipped to respond appropriately. They will, for example, ensure the immediate safety of someone in fear of domestic violence who has come to them for help. We know of other leaders however who, albeit with good intentions, have counselled women and children to stay with partners beyond what is reasonable or safe.

Christian scripture holds a high view of marriage but it never endorses abusive or violent behaviour. It can be a difficult issue to deal with particularly if both partners are in the same church. It is also possible that those exposed to it are reluctant to

acknowledge what is happening because they feel this will somehow devalue the marriage institution.

This makes it even more important for leaders to be informed of the issues, and be in a place to support and properly advise those seeking help.

### Victim's responses:

'I'm glad our church takes domestic violence seriously. I knew who to speak to and people in our church have been trained and understand what I'm going through'.

'I spoke to my vicar but he was not helpful. He said I had to speak to my husband and pray about the situation'.

## What is Domestic Violence?

Domestic violence or 'domestic abuse' is the physical, sexual or emotional abuse (including verbal and financial) between adults who have been intimate partners or family members, regardless of gender. It has much to do with power and control within the relationship.

There are obviously degrees of conflict and disagreement in every intimate relationship but domestic violence refers to the most serious situations where there is a real risk of physical, emotional and psychological harm.

Domestic violence can be:

**Physical:** slapping, punching, kicking, pushing, strangling or using a weapon to inflict injury

**Sexual:** sexual humiliation, rape, being forced to participate in sexual acts, punishment for not having sex.

**Emotional:** name calling, threats of violence / punishments, breaking / destroying possessions, threats to harm children, threats to self-harm, controlling / restricting movements such as going out, use of telephone, finance, controlling / restricting relationships

## The Facts <sup>i</sup>

Although domestic violence is chronically under-reported, research estimates that it:

- accounts for 16% of all violent crime
- has more repeat victims than any other crime - on average there will have been 35 assaults before a victim calls the police
- claims the lives of two women every week and 30 men per year
- will affect 1 in 4 women and 1 in 6 men in their lifetime

There are more than 150 domestic violence homicides each year and over 395,000 domestic violence incidents were reported in the year 2006/7.

## The Myths

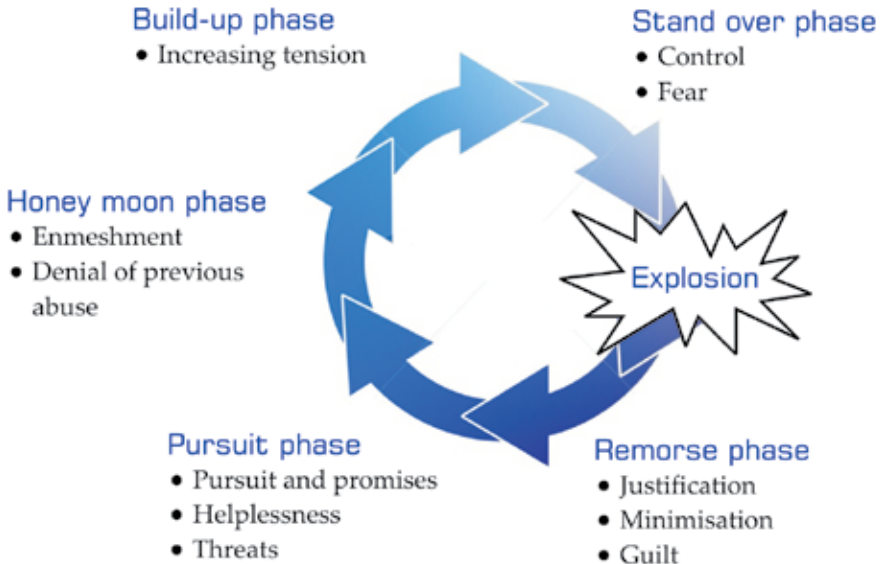
Myths surrounding domestic violence include:

- it is a largely working class phenomenon
- it occurs more often/is more severe in certain ethnic groups
- regret and remorse on the part of the perpetrator mean they have changed
- victims deserve what they get because they provoke the violence
- men are always the perpetrators

<sup>i</sup> *Crime in England and Wales Report  
Metropolitan Police Violent Crime Directorate April 2008*

## The Cycle of Domestic Violence

Domestic violence rarely occurs in a vacuum and is often the culmination of a build-up of tension over a period of time. Violent relationships often go through phases shown in the diagram below.



Perpetrators of domestic violence have said:

'I don't want to hit, but I keep getting nagged and it seems like she wants it'

'All I ever do is yell – I don't actually hit my partner. As long as my partner does what I say, no-one will get hurt'

'Hitting actually helps us. I get my tension relieved and it makes my partner behave. Afterwards we both feel better and we treat each other better'

## The Causes

Causes of domestic violence include both internal and external factors. The perpetrator may:

- be acutely jealous and/or controlling
- have mental health issues
- have drug/alcohol problems

Abuse may start because of:

- escalation of arguments/disputes
- pregnancy or a new birth in the family
- child contact or dispute over custody

There are also sociological factors as well as patriarchal and cultural traditions that can influence the treatment of women in our society.

## Christian homes not immune

Christian homes are not immune to domestic violence. There will be both victims and perpetrators within places of worship. The responsibility to offer help and be a voice for the prevention of domestic violence is fundamental to core Christian values – those of justice, equality, respect and care for one another. To ensure the physical safety and spiritual well-being of those coming through their doors, Christian leaders must be prepared to respond appropriately with knowledge and compassion in an effective and safe way.



## Domestic violence and the Bible

The Bible has often been misinterpreted and misused in domestic violence situations by the very people who have wanted to help. Victims have been told when disclosing to their minister or church leader to:

- pray harder
- submit to your husband
- try to get your partner to church
- lift up the abuse to the Lord

We have already said that the Bible places a high value on marriage but within the Christian fraternity there are many different views on the role of men and women within the marital relationship.

Most Christians acknowledge that both men and women are created in God's image - equal partners with distinctive roles (Genesis 1:27) and that the marriage vows contain a mutual covenant to love, comfort, honour, and be faithful. If one partner is abusing the other, in any way, the abuser is violating that covenant. It is very clear within the Christian tradition that God does not expect anyone to submit to violence at the hands of another person—whether or not they are married, but especially so within the marriage relationship.

Ask a roomful of Christians about their perspective on submission within the marital relationship and you will get a wide range of responses. Whatever our view, there is a very clear picture in Ephesians 5 of the need for men to love their wives as their own bodies and lay down their lives for them, as Christ does the church. And how does Christ love the church? Not by exerting power and control to manipulate, not through violence or abuse, but through a love marked by giving, not getting, by invitation and serving.

Consideration, respect and love from both partners should be what govern relationships in the home.

If, as Christians, we are seeking to emulate Christ's example in the way we conduct ourselves, it is indeed noteworthy how much Jesus respected and valued his relationship to women within a society that afforded them very little.

The church often has much to say about violent crimes in society but regarded violence in the home as a 'private matter' between a husband and wife. Church leaders need to acknowledge that biblically this is no longer acceptable and undertake to take an active role in dealing with domestic violence, just as they would any violent crime.

## What about Children?

Children are often called 'hidden victims' because responses to domestic violence can focus solely on the victim or perpetrator. Children do not have a choice when it comes to being drawn into domestic violence. They may be in the same room and may even intervene to try to stop what is happening. They may hear the abuse from another room or actually see physical injuries following an incident. They may even be forced to take part in verbally abusing the victim.

In 2005, the Adoption and Children Act 2002 extended the legal definition of harming children to include harm suffered by seeing or hearing ill treatment of others, especially in the home.

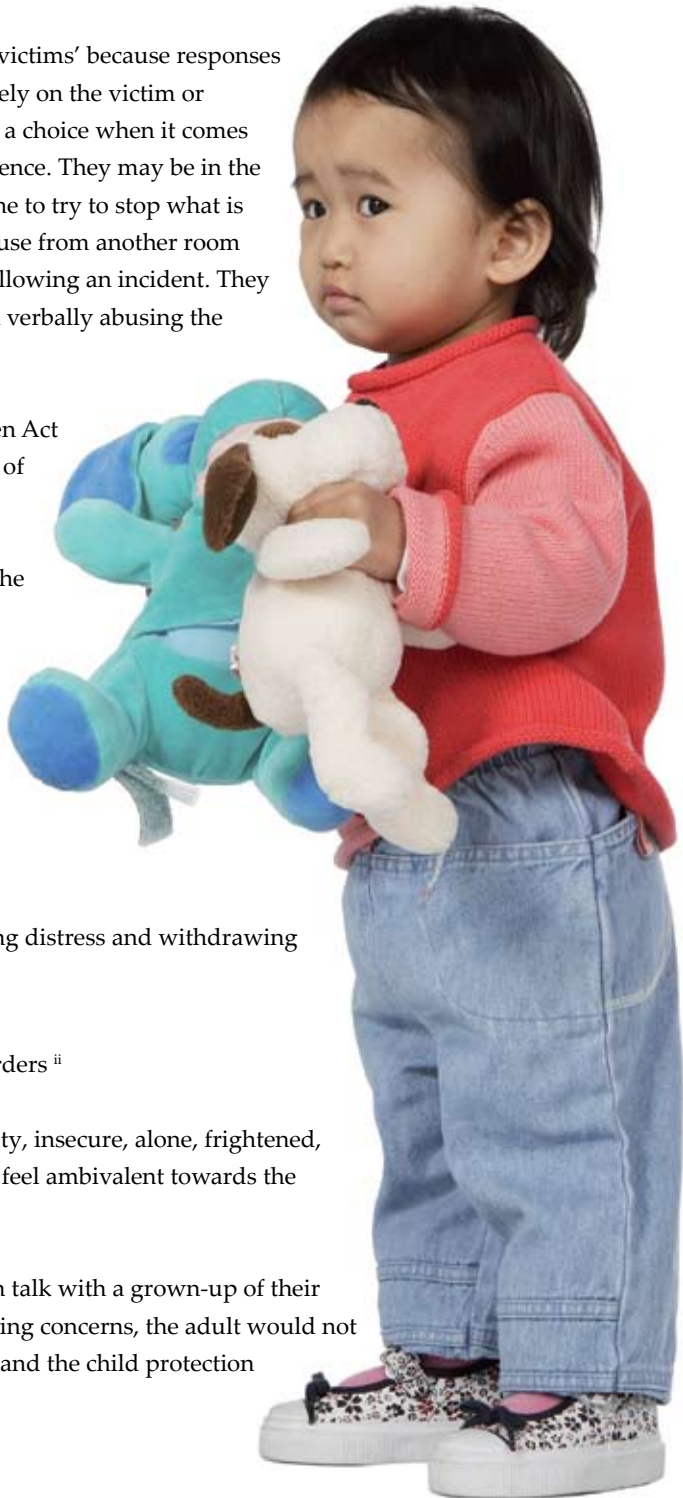
Children may react to witnessing abuse with:

- anxiety and depression
- difficulty sleeping, nightmares and flashbacks
- temper tantrums
- aggression and/or internalising distress and withdrawing from others
- lowered self-worth
- self-harming and eating disorders <sup>ii</sup>

Children may also feel angry, guilty, insecure, alone, frightened, powerless or confused. They may feel ambivalent towards the abuser and the victim.

Children need to feel that they can talk with a grown-up of their choice. Where there are safeguarding concerns, the adult would not be able to promise confidentiality and the child protection policy would apply.

<sup>ii</sup> *Royal College of Psychiatrists (2004)*



## **The National Domestic Violence Delivery Plan**

It is important to recognise domestic violence as a crime and victims are protected by the law in the same way as any assault or criminal offence. The police can intervene, arrest, detain and caution or charge anyone who is being abusive. Central government is taking great strides in tackling domestic violence through its National Domestic Violence Delivery Plan (NDVDP).

Under the NDVDP, those who perpetrate domestic violence may be subject to police involvement through Multi Agency Police Protection Arrangements (MAPPA) and Multi Agency Risk assessment Conferences (MARAC).

Reports to the NDVDP indicate the NHS is committed to the early identification of, and intervention with, domestic violence victims. In addition, many local authorities are increasing their efforts to address the effects of domestic violence on children to keep them safe <sup>iii</sup>.

## **What can church leaders do?**

Respond appropriately.

It is important to understand what a victim of domestic violence is experiencing:

- The abuse can include physical sexual and emotional abuse as well as destruction of property and ill treatment of pets.
- Children may also be subject to this abuse - if not directly, then by witnessing or hearing it.
- The abuse is likely to have gone on for some time
- The victim cannot change the perpetrator's abuse toward them.
- Unless the perpetrator accepts help and/or works at ending the violent behaviour, such abuse could result in serious harm or, at its worst, murder of the victim and/or children.
- Right now the victim may need a safe place

The Church is often the place people will turn to in a time of crisis and may be one of the few places where the abuser does not control or restrict a victim's movements. The police are the lead agency in situations of domestic violence, so in acute situations it may well be right to strongly encourage the victim to report it to them.

<sup>iii</sup> [www.crimereduction.homeoffice.gov.uk](http://www.crimereduction.homeoffice.gov.uk)

## Become a safe place

Be a safe haven where victims of domestic violence can come for help. Have brochures and posters in places where a victim can take the information without fear of discovery. Telephone numbers of local and national domestic abuse help-lines should also be included. Some of this information could be placed in a private location such as the toilets (male and female) to avoid scrutiny by others.

### Victim's response:

'I got help because I read a leaflet that my church had displayed in the ladies toilet'.

Churches can develop good relationships with other statutory and voluntary agencies working in this area to draw on their expertise and refer victims to them.

## Have a Safeguarding Policy

Just as the church should be working to a safeguarding policy for children, young people and vulnerable adults, the mission statement displayed on the church notice board could include a declaration about its condemnation of domestic violence and its commitment to offer care and support for victims.

For example:

*'the church holds that domestic violence in all its forms is unacceptable and inconsistent/ incompatible with the Christian faith and a Christian way of living'.*

Contact details of a person(s) within the church who is available to help could also be included.

## Learn about the issue

Learn about family abuse/violence through newsletter articles, in bulletins, and in seminars through adult education. Domestic violence should also be a topic of discussion in marriage preparation classes. One minister mentioned in the congregation newsletter that he would be attending a workshop on domestic violence. Soon after, congregants came forward with requests for assistance related to family violence. The leader had opened the door to the congregation and let it be known the church was ready to help.

### Victim's response:

'My vicar was really helpful. He knew where to refer me for help in the town where I lived'.

## **Speak out**

When appropriate, messages from the leaders should address domestic violence. This could be when focussing on a relevant topic such as suffering or victimisation or during the month of November - Domestic Violence Awareness Month.

## **Support local refuges and support groups**

This can be an outreach with time, talent or donations; through hands-on projects, such as collecting items for the refuge's use (e.g. toiletries, good quality clothing for children and adults).

## **What can victims do?**

There are several things you can do. Don't be tempted to do nothing!

## **Speak to a trusted friend**

You may like someone to give you moral support, go with you to talk to the police or provide a 'safe haven' while you consider what else you might do.

## **Call the police**

The police are instructed to treat any allegations of domestic violence seriously. When police receive a call they should ask about the immediate risk and danger to the victim and others. Their response is determined by the information they are given. For example, if there is something

happening at the time of the call or a threat to the victim or others, there should be an urgent response. The bottom line is always dial 999 in an emergency.

If there is no risk at that time, the police will generally request contact details where it is safe for the victim to be contacted. The reason is to prevent the abuser knowing the police are involved. The victim may be asked lots of other questions relating to her/his concerns. The police do this to help their investigation and to assess the risk to the victim and others, especially children.

## **Use helplines**

There are many domestic violence helplines operating throughout the UK, staffed by experienced professionals who can offer practical help, advice and support. Some can offer additional help with:

- emergency refuge accommodation
- safety planning and advice
- translation facilities if you have difficulty communicating in English

English National Domestic Violence

Helpline:

0808 2000 247

Northern Ireland Women's Aid 24 Hour

Domestic Violence Helpline:

028 9033 1818

Scottish Domestic Abuse Helpline:

0800 027 1234

Wales Domestic Abuse Helpline:

0808 80 10 800

Male Advice Line:

0808 801 0327,

Web: [www.mensadviceline.org.uk](http://www.mensadviceline.org.uk)

The Dyn Wales/Dyn Cymru Helpline:

0808 801 0321

National Centre for Domestic Violence:

08709 220704, 08009 702070

web:[www.ncdv.org.uk](http://www.ncdv.org.uk)

Refuge:

0808 2000 247

web: [www.refuge.org.uk](http://www.refuge.org.uk)

Women's Aid:

0808 2000 247

web: [www.womensaid.org.uk](http://www.womensaid.org.uk)

The Churches' Child Protection

Advisory Service:

0845 120 45 50

web: [www.ccpas.co.uk](http://www.ccpas.co.uk)



This is one of an expanding series of Help booklets published by C

See CCPAS website for more details [www.ccpas.co.uk](http://www.ccpas.co.uk)

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CHURCHES' 

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**Child Protection**  
ADVISORY SERVICE