

Practice guide



Domestic abuse!
How should my
church respond?

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The church, and indeed any place of worship, should be a safe, non-judgemental environment where women, children and men exposed to domestic abuse can seek 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 abuse 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 scriptures hold a high view of marriage but never endorse abusive or violent behaviour. This 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 violence are reluctant to acknowledge what is

happening because they feel this will somehow devalue the institution of marriage.

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.

So, what is domestic abuse?

The UN defines this as:

Any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty,

whether occurring in public or in private life. (1)

The Care Act broadened this to violence between any family members not just intimate partners.

In 2013 the definition of domestic abuse in the UK was changed to include 16 and 17 year olds.

These changes reflect the growing understanding of the nature of domestic abuse and of how domestic abuse impacts individuals. Where the focus was historically on physical violence, the definition has now been broadened to include controlling and coercive behaviour.

Controlling behaviour is: a range of acts designed to make a person subordinate and/or dependent by isolating them from sources of support, exploiting their resources and capacities for personal gain, depriving them of the means needed for independence, resistance and escape and regulating their everyday behaviour.

Coercive behaviour is: an act or a pattern of acts of assault, threats, humiliation and intimidation or other abuse that is used to harm, punish, or frighten the victim.

Domestic abuse is a repeated pattern of behaviour used to control other

people. It happens in all kinds of relationships: heterosexual, lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender. It can happen between people who are dating, living together, have children together or are married to each other. It can happen either when people live together or separately. It can happen after the relationship or marriage has ended. It can happen to people who regularly attend Church and are Christians.

Some examples may include:

- Constantly checking where someone is
- Telling them they are ugly, too fat/thin, stupid, useless, etc.
- Treating them as a servant/slave
- Constantly putting a person down or criticising them (e.g. telling them they are a bad mother/father or bad wife/husband.)
- Preventing them from seeing friends or family
- Not letting them get a job or making them work long hours
- Shouting, smashing things, throwing things, sulking
- Hitting, pushing, slapping, kicking, punching

- Threatening to hurt someone they care about such as the children or their pets
- Rape or forcing someone to do sexual things they don't want to do
- Using psychological abuse to make a woman/man believe the abuse is his or her fault
- Stalking and harassment (including online and texting/ constantly calling)
- Using scripture to justify their behaviour e.g., 'I'm the head of the house and you have to submit to me'
- Not giving them any money, or taking all their money from them or checking exactly what they spend money on

Everyone has the right to feel safe, but controlling behaviour thrives on fear. Coercive control tends to follow an ongoing pattern rather than consisting of one-off incidents.

The facts

Although domestic violence is chronically under-reported, one incident of domestic violence is reported to the police every minute and research estimates that it:

- Accounts for 14% of all violent crime

- At least 1 in 5 women and 1 in 6 men in the UK will experience domestic abuse in their lifetime.
- In one year, it is thought that 1.4 million women and 600,000 men experience domestic abuse in England and Wales (2)
- An estimated 4.6 million women in England and Wales have experienced domestic abuse since the age of 16. (3)
- 1 in 7 children and young people under 18 will have experienced living with domestic abuse (4)
- In 2009, the forced marriage unit provided direct support to victims in the UK and overseas in 377 cases (5)

The Myths surrounding domestic abuse 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
- It is an issue that should be kept within the family
- Men are always the perpetrators

There are obviously degrees of conflict and disagreement in every

relationship but domestic abuse refers to the most serious situations where there is a real risk of physical, emotional and psychological harm.

Domestic abuse 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.

In churches too

It is hard to come to terms with the reality that domestic abuse can happen in our churches by our fellow Christians. Yet abuse is perpetrated by Christians, and women in our congregations can suffer in silence due to the shame and stigma surrounding abuse. The Methodist Church in the UK conducted a survey in 2002 (6) and found that:

- 17% of respondents had experienced domestic abuse

- The main perpetrators of the violence were husbands and partners

Christianity Magazine, in conjunction with Restored, conducted a survey in September 2013 and discovered:

- 40% had suffered some form of intimidation in their relationship
- 16% had suffered some form of physical violence

The Evangelical Alliance UK in its 'How is the Family Report' 2010 found that:

- 10% of women answering the survey had experienced physical abuse in their relationship and
- 7% of men admitted perpetrating physical abuse (7)

Christian homes are not immune to domestic abuse. 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 abuse and the Bible

The Bible has often been misinterpreted and misused in domestic violence situations by the very people who should have helped. 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

The above responses are not helpful and could be unsafe.

It has already been said that the Bible places a high value on marriage but within the Christian community 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 remarkable how much Jesus respected and valued his relationship to women within a society that afforded them very little.

The church has often had much to say about violent crimes in society but tended to regard abuse 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 abuse, just as they would any violent crime.

Key factors when supporting a victim:

- Find a safe place and time for the person to talk. Listen and take what they say seriously. Their description is only the tip of the iceberg.
- Have someone else present – if this is acceptable to the victim.
- Give priority to their immediate safety.
- Empower them to make their own decisions.
- Support and respect their choices. Even if they choose initially to return to the abuser, it is their choice. However if there are children involved their safety must come first.
- Give them information about relevant support agencies and, if appropriate, offer to contact the agency on their behalf and do so in their presence or offer a safe and private place from which they can contact the relevant agency. Use the expertise of those properly trained.
- Reassure them that this is not their fault. They don't deserve this treatment, and it is not God's will for them to be in a harmful relationship.
- Love and support them and be patient.
- Protect their confidentiality.
- Understand that couple counselling/family mediation/marriage courses/healthy relationship courses will not help domestic abuse situations.

Key factors when dealing with a perpetrator:

- If the perpetrator of the violence is a member of a congregation, it would be inappropriate for anyone from the church to engage in couples counselling. This is because it could give the perpetrator further opportunities to exert power and control over their partner. The first priority must be for the perpetrator to address their violent behaviour and the leader can help find an appropriate treatment program.
- It is potentially dangerous for the leader to discuss with the perpetrator anything the victim has told them. This is a breach of confidentiality. Not only could the perpetrator attempt to manipulate the faith leader into colluding with them, but they could also be putting themselves and the victim in serious danger.
- It is important to liaise with the authorities especially where an individual is subject to MAPPA or MARAC involvement. It may be necessary to discuss boundaries or restrictions you would need to place on them.

Key factors when supporting perpetrators of domestic abuse:

- Place the victim's safety as the highest priority.
- Meet them in a public place or in the church with several other people around, if meeting is appropriate.
- When not in their presence, pray for them. Ask God to help them stop the abusive behaviour, choose to change their behaviour and find a new way of living.
- Understand that they alone are responsible for their behaviour and that being abusive is a CHOICE.
- Maintain awareness of the danger they may pose to you, other people, but especially to the victim, their children and wider family.
- Research treatment programmes and services to help them change their behaviour.
- Find ways to collaborate with the police, probation and other services to hold them accountable.
- Address any religious rationalizations they may offer or questions they may have.
- Let them know that you know about the violence. If they are to be approached this should be by a trained professional and should be a) with the victim's permission, b) their awareness that they plan to talk to them and c) certainty that their partner is safely separated from the perpetrator.
- Don't accept at face value their account of their "conversion experience". If it is genuine, it will be a tremendous resource as they proceed with accountability. If it is not genuine, it is only another way to manipulate you and the system and maintain control of the process to avoid accountability.

Useful contacts

There are many domestic abuse 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

National Domestic Violence Helpline

0808 2000 247

(Run in partnership between Women's Aid and Refuge)

Refuge

0808 2000 247

National Centre for Domestic Violence

0844 804 4999

Men's Advice Line

0808 801 0327

Wales Domestic Abuse Helpline

0808 80 10 800

Dyn Wales/Dyn Cymru (for men in Wales)

0808 801 0321

Scottish Domestic Abuse and forced marriage Helpline

0800 027 1234

Northern Ireland Domestic and Sexual Violence Helpline

0808 802 1414

Respect (for people who are abusive to partners)

0808 802 4040

Forced Marriage Unit

020 7008 0151

National Stalking Helpline

0808 802 0300

The Churches Child Protection Advisory Service (CCPAS)

0845 120 4550

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.

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. This is because any children in a family where domestic abuse is perpetrated will be severely affected by this abuse.

They may:

- Witness the violence directly, or indirectly by seeing their parent's distress or injuries
- Intervene to protect their parent, either physically or by getting help
- Be forced by the adult abuser to join in with the abuse
- Have disrupted routines, sleep patterns, etc
- Be allowed little or no social contact with others
- Be told to keep it 'secret'
- Be experiencing abuse
- Be neglected

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
- 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 (8).

Teenagers

Young people and teenagers may also experience abuse in their relationships, with their own boy/girlfriend. It is estimated that:

- 4 in 10 teenage girls have experienced sexual coercion(9)
- 1 in 5 girls have experienced physical abuse and intimidation from their boyfriends (10)
- 25% of young women (aged over 13) experience physical violence and 72% experience emotional

abuse in their own relationships (11)

- 78% of teenaged girls experiencing domestic violence during the first 3 months after giving birth had not experienced domestic violence before delivery (12)
- “Sexting” and “revenge pornography” are ways in which a person can be humiliated by their partner
- Young people can also be perpetrators of domestic violence

Emotional abuse in these relationships can be seen as jealousy, and a lack of trust can be disguised as or misinterpreted as genuine care and concern. Being isolated or prevented from seeing friends can further add to this.

Central Government response to domestic violence

There is no specific criminal offence of domestic violence, although there are a number of relevant offences ranging from murder, rape and manslaughter through to threatening behaviour. The police can intervene, arrest, detain and caution or charge anyone who is being abusive. There are also a number of civil remedies, including non- molestation orders

and occupation orders. The Domestic Violence, Crime and Victims Act 2004 introduced further powers of arrest in connection with domestic violence, greater help for same-sex couples and those who have never lived together, and wider powers for courts to issue restraining orders.

The Government has also implemented a range of non-legislative measures, including introducing specialist domestic violence courts, multi- agency risk assessment conferences and independent Domestic Violence Advisors.

The National Domestic Violence Delivery Plan

Central government has addressed 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).

Violence against women and girls recognises that the majority of domestic violent incidents are perpetrated against women. In March 2011 the government launched ‘Call to end violence against women and girls: action plan’. The action

plan contains measures for central government to:

- Prevent violence from happening by challenging the attitudes and behaviours which foster it and intervening early where possible to prevent it.
- Provide adequate levels of support where violence does occur.
- Work in partnership to obtain the best outcome for victims and their families.
- Take action to reduce the risk to women and girls who are victims of these crimes and ensure that perpetrators are brought to justice.

www.crimereduction.homeoffice.gov.uk

What can church leaders do?

Church leaders can help by responding appropriately. It is important to understand what a victim of domestic violence is experiencing and acknowledge that 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 and

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.

A charter for churches

It is important for the membership of our churches to debate the issue of domestic abuse and to develop our understanding of the impact of domestic abuse on the lives of victims and their families.

By adopting this Charter, the local church will be committing itself to undertake positive steps to provide information, support and pastoral care for those experiencing domestic violence.

By displaying this Charter on its premises, the local church will be making a public statement about its condemnation of domestic violence and its availability to offer information, care and support to those who are victims.

The charter

This Church: _____

- Understands domestic abuse to be the abuse of a person physically, sexually, psychologically, spiritually, emotionally, socially or financially within an intimate or family-type relationship and that forms a pattern of coercive and controlling behaviour. This can include forced marriage and so- called 'honour crimes'.
- Holds that domestic abuse in all its forms is unacceptable and irreconcilable with the Christian faith and a Christian way of living.
- Accepts that domestic abuse is a serious problem which occurs in church families as well as in wider society.
- Undertakes to listen, support and care for those affected by domestic abuse.
- Will always place the safety of women and children as the highest priority.
- Will work with domestic abuse support agencies, will learn from them and support them in appropriate ways, and will publicise their work.
- Will play its part in teaching that domestic abuse is a sin.
- Believes in a God of love, justice, mercy, and forgiveness.
- Will teach what it means to be male and female, equally made in God's image.
- Will seek to appoint advisors to encourage the use of good practice guidelines and keep the church informed about the implementation and development of these guidelines

(Sourced from Restored Churches pack, 2015)

Consider displaying a charter on domestic abuse in your church.

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

Learn about the issue of family abuse/violence through newsletter articles, in bulletins, and in seminars through adult education. Domestic abuse 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.

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).

Provide teaching on appropriate relationships. Churches should offer marriage preparation and enrichment courses for couples and ensure that equality, conflict, violence and control are addressed. All programmes in the church should regularly address issues of anger and violence.

Sources

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12. www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/ojdp/219180.pdf
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Christian sources

Restored – Church resource pack – www.restoredrelationships.org

CEDAR (Catholics Experiencing Domestic Abuse Resources). www.cedar.uk.net
enquiries@cedar.uk.net

Domestic Violence Resource Guide for Faith Leaders www.azmag.gov/archive/DV/Resources/RDVC_2011-04-04_Domestic-Violence-Resource-Guide-for-Faith-Leaders.pdf

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The Baptist Union of Great Britain Breaking the Silence pack of resources www.baptist.org.uk/Articles/471609/BUGB_Guide_to.aspx

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