

A Plea to Pastors

Dear Pastor,

Since 1995, FOCUS Ministries, Inc. has been reaching out to women who are struggling in abusive and dysfunctional relationships.

Most of them belong to churches like yours. They sit in the pews on Sunday morning alongside their abusive husband. Perhaps you are unaware that behind the smiles and handshakes is a secret that is steadily destroying the entire family.

Statistics show that one in every four women in each church community are *being* abused by their partner or they have been at some time in the past. One in every four—*count them!* How many does that make in your congregation?

If you are skeptical about this statistic being true in your church, please consider the following reasons why you may be unaware:

Women may be hesitant to come to you with their story if you have not addressed the problem of domestic violence publicly from your pulpit. When was the last time you took a strong stand against violence (verbal, emotional & physical) from the pulpit?

When they finally get up the courage to tell someone, women need to know their pastor will believe them, will maintain confidentiality, and will be willing to help. How approachable, trustworthy, and safe are you?

The abuser may be one of your staff, deacons, Sunday School teachers, or your biggest tither. Are you willing to confront someone you respect and trust about their abusive behavior?

You may have missed the warning signs that should alert you to suspect domestic violence. Do you know the classic profile of an abuser and a victim? How skilled are you in determining who is telling the truth?

Many Christian women who are being abused remain silent because they have been told by their pastors to pray harder, be more submissive, cook their husband's favorite meals, keep a clean house, and develop more patience and understanding in order to make their husband happy. Are you guilty of giving well-meaning advice without knowing what is really going on behind closed doors?

Many women will only share part of their story to see how you will react. You will only see the tip of the iceberg. When someone comes to you with a relationship problem, how deeply do you probe? How seriously do you take her concern?

You may be so focused on a particular ministry in your church (overseas missions, evangelism, prison ministry) that you don't notice the needs in your own church family. Is your church unbalanced in its outreach?

You may be avoiding the obvious need because of legal and personal risks of getting involved. How far are you willing to go to help someone in crisis?

You did not receive training in seminary on how to deal with domestic violence, and you think annual marriage conferences will take care of the problem. Are you willing to learn new skills for dealing with domestic violence that will not work in regular marriage counseling?

You may not want to know what is really going on because issues of abuse are hard to deal with, and you don't want to be perceived as being soft on divorce if you advise someone to leave an abusive marriage.

During the past nine years, we have offered our services and literature, free of charge, to pastors and churches who want to learn more about domestic violence. Very few have accepted our offer to supply their churches with literature or lead a workshop on domestic violence.

Has your church invited local ministries (crisis pregnancy centers, food and clothing ministries, etc.) and missionaries to speak to your congregation? Are you supporting them financially? I commend you for this. These are all good outreaches which need to be supported by the local church.

Unfortunately, many families are suffering in silence because the plague of domestic violence is being ignored, and ministries like ours who want to help are struggling financially because the Christian community does not see the need to partner with us.

What will it take for you, as a pastor, to take this problem seriously? Sadly, many people don't get involved until domestic violence affects someone they love—a daughter, mother, friend, neighbor. We are confident the problem is already pervasive in your congregation, whether you are aware of it or not. Since someone you love *is* being affected, won't you take action *now*? Here are the tools you will need:

Education

Domestic violence has many facets which cannot be compared to difficulties in typical marriages. The method of counseling is entirely different. If you do not understand the mindset of an abuser, you will not be able to help his victim effectively. In fact, you may put her in greater danger.

If you are not aware of the dynamics of domestic violence, make it a priority to learn. We are available for speaking engagements, to present workshops, or work with you one-on-one to help make you and your church more aware. We provide training for support group leaders if someone in your church wants to facilitate one, and our Pastor's Guide to Domestic Violence is an invaluable resource for pastors and lay counselors.

Clarification

When you understand that an abuser feels justified by scripture to “keep his wife in line” because he is the head of the house, you must clarify your sermon on the husband's role to explain about “servant leadership,” as well as defining specific actions that are considered abusive. You should remind men that scripture does not give them permission to punish or discipline their wives, *even if they are not submissive*. God is the one who disciplines his “adult” children.

When you teach about submission, don't stop short by just instructing wives to submit to their husbands. Husbands are to submit to their wives; children are to submit to their parents; employees are to submit to their employers; and we are all to submit to God (Eph. 5:21-32)

Explain Jesus' style of servant leadership which had nothing to do with external control or coercion. He did not use His power to control and demand, but to invite, nurture, and serve.

Are you aware that many good Christian men in your congregation view woman as “second-class” or “less than” men. They may not openly admit to this attitude, but listen closely to their jokes and occasional references that belie the belief that men are superior to women and are entitled to certain advantages and rights. Be careful in your sermons to clearly define the man's role and responsibility in the home and at church which should be modeled after Christ's example of humility, servanthood, compassion, forgiveness, and long-suffering. Remind them of the scriptures which indicate men are not spiritually superior to women (Gal. 3:28; 1 Peter 3:7).

If *you* harbor a secret attitude of superiority, ask God to reveal truth from His Word and for a teachable spirit.

Compassion

Compassion will move you beyond good intentions to love in action. Ask God to give you the compassion of Christ as you shepherd His people.

Courage

Getting involved in domestic violence is very risky and messy. Many people shrink back because they are afraid of personal attack. If you have the courage to get involved, you may be threatened by a lawsuit or by bodily harm to you and your family. If God has called you to defend the defenseless, just as Jesus would do,

are you willing to lay your life on the line for someone else? Steve Dresselhaus, a missionary pastor in Mexico (who has been threatened with guns, machetes, and other weapons for helping victims of domestic violence) wrote, “My church needs to know that serving Christ is an action lifestyle, not an academic one.” Ask God for the courage it takes to go the distance.

Wisdom

You will need to rely on wisdom from above to discern the truth about a violent situation. Most abusers are very clever and charming. They will try to convince you their wife has a mental problem and needs help. They know how to use religious words and tears to convince you they have repented and changed. You will need discernment when a victim denies being abused in order to protect her husband, and wisdom to know how to proceed without putting her in greater danger.

Self-Sacrifice

One pastor so accurately observed, “We in America, with our love for comfort, have done a pretty good job of focusing on the promises, the blessings, the wealth, and the perks of being Christians.” Will you give up your level of comfort to meet this great need instead of waiting for others to do it?

Toughness

The abuser also needs your help. He is caught up in a cycle that needs to be broken, and he needs support and accountability to change his mindset about power and control. Are you tough enough to encounter rage and hostility from someone who may not want to change?

Tenderness

The victim doesn't need you to take over control of her life. She already has a controlling spouse who has convinced her she is not capable of making decisions on her own. She needs tender compassion and respect from someone who will present her with options so she can make choices and regain her dignity and self-worth.

Integrity

When you promise confidentiality, you must keep it! Don't make the mistake of sharing your conversation with the victim's abuser, even if he is a friend or serves on your board. When you promise to help someone, follow through. Don't place strings on your help, and don't bail out when the going gets tough. Guard yourself from getting emotionally or sexually involved with someone who is looking to you for strength.

Spiritual Direction

Providing help and safety is your *second* priority. The *first* priority is to help them find their hope in God, not in the church or the legal system. Help them put their pursuit of God before their pursuit of a better marriage. Ask God to help you put the safety of women and children above your desire to preserve the marriage at all costs.

Resources

Refuge requires resources. The church needs to provide safety and financial help for victims of domestic violence. Don't depend on government-sponsored agencies to do what the church should be doing. Generously support Christian-based domestic violence ministries prayerfully and financially. We desperately need your help!

Refocus

Love in action is no less important than evangelism. Is your church off-balance in its priority? Will you allow God to refocus your direction?

Our plea to pastors and churches is that you get as involved in saving lives as you are in saving souls!