

"WHAT IF..."

WHAT IF THE CHURCH OR THE PRESBYTERY DOESN'T WANT TO TALK ABOUT DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

There are many reasons people don't want to talk about domestic violence...

They feel that it isn't taking place in their church;

They think it is a private matter;

It is a very disturbing issue;

People don't know what to do about it.

Hopefully, no one in our churches still believes that if someone marries and violence occurs, it is his or her cross to bear (most often it is her).

Domestic violence cuts across all social and cultural borders – race, economic class, education, age, etc. That means that violence is probably taking place in some family in every one of our churches. If for no other reason, we should be concerned with violence because it affects our children. Children can become victims themselves, and even witnessing the violence can have serious developmental consequences on them. The 2004 PADVN Domestic Violence Packet examined the theme of children witnessing domestic violence – the packet can be seen at www.pcusa.org/phewa/padvn.

What, then, do we do to get the presbytery or our church involved? First, we make our case. We learn about the situation in our community by talking with persons in shelters, the police, etc. We need to be able to state with certainty that violence occurs frequently in our community. Most cities keep careful records of reported instances of domestic violence.

Then we look to the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) for the rationale to be concerned. In our Book of Order, The great Ends of the Church (G-1.0200) states:

The great ends of the church are the proclamation of the gospel for the salvation of human kind, the shelter, nurture and spiritual fellowship of the children of God; the promotion of social righteousness, the exhibition of the Kingdom of Heaven to the world.

Our church is not sheltering or nurturing its members if they are living in violence without our walking beside them. We are not promoting social righteousness if we are not confronting abusers; nor are we exhibiting the Kingdom of Heaven if in our midst are persons being physically abused.

In our Brief Statement of Faith we learn that, *In sovereign love God created the world good and makes everyone equally in God's image, male and female...to live as one community.* Certainly community is being broken when violence exists. Domestic violence is all about "power over" which flies in the face of equality between men and women. In addition, if we are made in the image of God, violence against women is violence against the image of God.

The 213th General Assembly (2001) approved a policy statement, *Turn Mourning Into Dancing! A Policy Statement on Healing Domestic Violence*. It is a great help in understanding domestic violence. That policy gives us credibility when we approach the presbytery or the church to address the issue. In the policy, you will find several scripture references that emphasize that the church is called to be:

- A sanctuary;
- An empathetic community;
- A covenant community;
- A healing community.

When we are confident that we can present the need, clearly and cogently, there are several approaches we can take:

- Try to interest the person in charge of Christian Education in the church and/or presbytery to make domestic violence a priority in the curriculum.
- Approach Presbyterian Women to garner support. Although domestic violence is a community problem and not a “women’s problem,” women probably are more sympathetic to the issue. In addition, Presbyterian Women have a wonderful communication system that would be effective in urging interest in the topic.
- If possible, ask a survivor to tell her story to the session or presbytery leadership.
- Ask your pastor to preach on domestic violence and include the issue in pastoral prayers.
- Approach the presbytery Peacemaking Committee. Domestic Violence legitimately falls within their sphere. Ask them to petition the presbytery to have training on domestic violence and strongly encourage all pastors and a representative from each church to attend.
- Approach the youth director in your church and the presbytery to request that they include domestic violence and dating violence in their program. It is imperative that we reach young people before the pattern is set and to prevent them from being wounded.
- Brainstorm with your friends in the church about how to address the church’s or the presbytery’s recalcitrance. You will come up with some wonderful ideas.

Above all, don’t give up. God doesn’t mean for people to live in violent situations, especially in the family—a sacred space. Rely on prayer throughout your endeavor, for strength and direction.