

# SOMETHING TO TALK ABOUT

## A conversation guide for church leaders

### **Domestic Abuse – When It Arrives, Don't Mess Things Up!**

How's this for a bad day at the office: You are in the office working late in the afternoon preparing Sunday's sermon when the wife of a staff member or board member walks in and, in an avalanche of rocky emotion, unloads details of years of alleged emotional and physical abuses against her by her husband. "How can this be?" you wonder. The husband is an influential leader in the church. Sure, there have been a few times when it seemed their relationship was a little bit "frosty," but you can't imagine him doing the things you just heard. What do I do now?

You decide to call the church health guy at EFCA West to seek some advice. Bob tells you to stop – don't do anything. At least not yet, because you have a lot of things that you need to think about and that need to be done, and you are likely not prepared to do any of them right now.

Domestic abuse and violence (I'll use the general term "domestic abuse" hereafter) is an epidemic in our country. In my policing career it was the call for service I hated most – not because it was statistically so dangerous, but because there was no chance for me to actually fix the deeply seated problems that had been unchecked for years that led to the call for service. Shortly after I left, it was likely to start up again. Far too often, the wife (generally, but sometimes the husband) was battered, bloodied, and bruised. Sometimes I saw a Bible on the coffee table and wondered if anyone at their church had a clue about what went on in this home. Children cowered in their rooms or behind a doorway.

Dealing with a domestic abuse event involving church members is a high-risk, low-frequency event – the stakes are high, we don't want to make things worse, and we seldom have actual experience dealing with these situations. As such, church leaders should not rely on their instincts, generalized pastoral experience, or sudden inspiration from the Holy Spirit in handling domestic abuse incidents. We need to have a plan in place before we ever encounter the event.

Domestic abuse, because the stakes are high and we seldom encounter it, is something to talk about, as unpleasant as it might seem. Let me give you some suggestions and some ideas to help start the conversation.

- What resources do our church leaders and staff have immediately at hand to reference and guide them when confronted with a domestic abuse situation? Do we know what is available and where to find it? Seldom do domestic abuse victims tell us in advance that they want to talk with us because they are being abused; instead, they make an appointment to talk about a family or personal matter. Can you exercise the self-control to take a quick look at your guidance document *before* you respond or give any advice?
- What have we taught from scripture about the marriage relationship between husbands and wives? Looking back, I believe in my earlier years I heard many a sermon about wives submitting to husbands and significantly less on husbands loving their wives “just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her to make her holy...” and to “love their wives as their own bodies.”<sup>1</sup> With marriages and families being of such great importance to God, to the church, and to humans in general, how much do we teach about it in our churches? When we come to scripture such as Ephesians 5, do we merely encourage and exhort to the good behavior, or do we also condemn the sins of abuse and misapplications of these verses as well? Is having a strong, Christ-honoring marriage relegated to reading self-help books or is it important enough to preach from our pulpits? Do our children know what God-honoring dating relationships might be? Have they been taught to recognize warning signs of an unhealthy relationship and flee from them?
- All too often, when church leaders learn of a domestic abuse situation, their first response is to work to “save” the marriage. This is wrong. Our first response should be to ensure the victim’s safety and to stop the abuse. Is long-term, ongoing violence/abuse considered “biblical” grounds for divorce? What alternatives, based upon our understanding of scripture (all of it) does such a victim have? These are topics about which leadership team have clarity *before* encountering them in real life.
- Are your church leaders and staff skilled investigators and abuse victim counselors? If not, why are we so often tempted to investigate and provide specialized counseling ourselves? Who in our community can we look to that can do these specialized tasks for us?
- Is it wise or helpful to have a woman victim of abuse interviewed and counseled by an all-male group of church leaders? Victim advocates and counselors strongly discourage this. What should such an interview/counseling environment look like and why?
- Domestic abuse advocates advise that church leaders should not pressure victims to confront their abusers, nor should the church leaders do so, until the victim is prepared and has agreed to do so. What resources are available to us to care pastorally and practically for an abuse victim in the interim?
- Abusers are quite often adept at deflecting accusations and even blaming the victim for their sinful actions. Don’t buy that garbage and stop it immediately. Most of us don’t have

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<sup>1</sup> See Ephesians 5:21-33 (NIV)

much experience effectively dealing with self-righteous pathological liars, so it is easy to fall into their trap.

- Many a church leader has gone astray by their impatience in handling these situations. The abuse and the fertile soil in which it has taken hold in the home has often taken years to germinate and grow, yet we leaders can get frustrated when everything is not “back to normal” after a few weeks and a few counseling sessions, especially when we have spouted scripture to the victim to encourage her (or him) to forgive and work on saving their marriage. What took years to develop will take years to fully address and the marriage may never “be saved.” We live in a fallen world. Come quickly, Lord Jesus!
- Never share the blame for domestic abuse between the perpetrator and the victim. The perpetrator is *always* to blame for his (or her) actions. Period. Controlling one’s spouse through violence, threats of violence, or other abuse is never right. Don’t fall into the “shared blame” trap, and don’t let a perpetrator go there either.

I suggest that church leaders carefully consider doing these two things.

- Go to the Website for the Domestic Kindness organization and peruse their list of resources (<https://domestickindness.org/resources>). There are additional resources under the “more” tab on the Website. Domestic Kindness is an organization that has grown out of the Evangelical Free Church of Diamond Bar (California). They have published a list of resources as well as training curriculum and they offer additional resources for church leaders who may benefit from such help. As they are based in California, their contact resources are mostly based in Southern California, but you should be able to find similar resources near you by looking around a bit.
- Perhaps more important, please consider preaching to your congregation about marriage from a passage such as Ephesians 5 in October. October is Domestic Violence Awareness Month and would be a great time to remind husbands and wives what God says about the relationship between husbands and wives and let the congregation know that domestic abuse is sin and that church leaders want to help those in our church that are either enslaved by this sin or victimized by this sin. And use the month of September to do a little research to prepare yourselves to minister wisely and effectively when the time comes.

Domestic abuse is real. And it is in our churches. We are fallen people who need help. And that’s something to talk about.

*Let us know if we can help and how your conversation goes.  
Contact Bob Osborne by e-mail at [bob.osborne@efca.org](mailto:bob.osborne@efca.org).*

*This is one of a series of articles intended to facilitate and guide church leaders’ conversations about significant issues that often are not talked about among pastors, boards, and church leadership teams. Prior articles can be found at <https://efcawest.efcadistrict.org/something-to-talk-about-archives/>*