

# **Sexual and Domestic Violence**

## **A sampling of experience and opinion in the United Church of Christ 2009**

Justice & Witness Ministries (JWM) in conjunction with FaithTrust Institute recently assessed the experiences and opinions of UCC members and leaders regarding sexual and domestic violence. A questionnaire was available online and distributed in hard copy at the beginning with the National Youth Event (July 2008) and then elsewhere to youth and young adults, adults, and authorized leaders throughout the UCC. We used Survey Monkey, an online survey software, to gather the data. Although the sample used is self-selected and not random, we believe it offers us a snapshot of the UCC that can help us shape the UCC's response to the widespread problems of sexual and domestic violence.

**What will strike some as remarkable is that the data we gathered contains nothing remarkable.** The numbers of persons who have experienced sexual and domestic violence in this sample are very consistent with the national averages. In other words, members of the UCC are neither more nor less likely to have been victims or offenders of sexual or domestic violence. **However, this means that like other faith groups, we have significant problems in our midst that cause damage to individuals, relationships, families and our churches.**

**All figures cited here are approximations** drawn from the data we collected. This is not a scientific survey.

**Demographics: 82 males + 289 females = 371 total**

The survey responses are representative of the UCC by age, race, gender, sexual orientation, geography, and clergy/lay.

### **Data Summary**

**Youth: 22 males + 103 females = 125 total**

Incidence of victimization among youth is consistent with national averages except that child sexual abuse is slightly lower in the survey sample. Dating violence, including verbal abuse, is typical at 25 percent, though gender specific on physical violence: 15 percent of females were victims versus zero percent of males. Sexual boundary crossing by ministers was reported by 5-10 percent of girls and boys. Harmful behavior towards one's date was reported by 15-23 percent of females and males. Help seeking is weighted towards friends; also pastor/teacher/parent. One third have participated in a youth group discussion on these issues. 16 percent used Our Whole Lives Curriculum. There's evidence of strong support for church's role in addressing, especially in Building Healthy Relationships.

**Adult Laypersons: 29 males + 123 females = 152 total**

Intimate partner violence figures are consistent with national averages (1 in 3 women and 1 in 10 men are victims). Marital rape was reported by 1 in 4 women and by no men. 1 in 5 men and women reported experiencing child sexual abuse, and 1 in 10 women reported incest. Women had faith issues, and men did not. Women sought help from a therapist or friend and occasionally from a pastor, whereas men sought help from the police, a friend, or a family member. 28 percent of adults have heard a sermon or adult ed presentation on these issues, and 36 percent of their churches have a Safe Church Policy. There's evidence of strong support for the church to address these issues at every level.

Among both youth and adult lay members of the UCC, there are significant experiences of sexual and domestic violence. In this data, clergy do not figure significantly as resources to victims, survivors, or offenders. Friends and family members are turned to frequently; this indicates that we should train not only clergy, but also laity who might be a first resource for someone.

**Adult Clergy: 31 males + 63 females = 94 total**

Of the clergy who responded to the questionnaire, 75 percent serve local churches and two thirds are heterosexual. In terms of their own experiences of sexual and domestic violence, the numbers who reported domestic violence were close to the laypeople's experiences. However, the numbers of survivors of sexual assault were higher: 32 percent of women and 16 percent of men. Survivors of childhood sexual abuse were also higher than for laypeople, though closer to the national average. Unfortunately, we neglected to ask the clergy about their own experiences of sexual boundary crossing by other clergy.

We tried to discern whether clergy are seeing individual victims, survivors, and offenders in their pastoral ministries; the overwhelming answer is "yes." Adult survivors of child sexual abuse, victims of domestic violence, victims of sexual assault, and offenders within the family were the most frequent. 85 percent of clergy have referred someone to a domestic violence agency, and less than 25 percent have referred someone to a batterers' program, a rape crisis program, or the police. 50-93 percent of clergy know victims and offenders in their congregations. Given this, we should no longer hear the excuse, "No one ever comes to me with this problem." Although this data shows there's clearly an awareness of the need to address sexual and domestic violence in our local churches, this is still a small, select sample of respondents.

44 percent have preached a sermon about sexual and domestic violence, whereas 15 percent of laity have heard a sermon (see above). 27 percent address domestic violence in their pre-marital counseling, and 68 percent have had some training. Although the majority feels adequately prepared to address sexual and domestic violence, they also request more training and materials specifically for victims and offenders. Finally, 15 percent of these congregations have used Our Whole Lives Curriculum.

**The snapshot of the UCC provided by responses to this questionnaire can lead to the following conclusions:**

1. The common experience of sexual and domestic violence for males and females is evident in the UCC as in all other faith communities.
2. The numbers and impact fall disproportionately on females which parallels national data.
3. Our youth are struggling with abuse issues in their families, their dating relationships, and among their peers.
4. Youth and adults expect their churches to provide resources for addressing these experiences.
5. Training of laity in the basics of sexual and domestic violence and in how to support a friend or family member could be a potential resource for youth and adults.
6. Clergy are not viewed by most as a potential resource; yet clergy generally feel prepared to be a resource. Why is there a disconnect?
7. There are more survivors among clergy than among the laity. Why is this, and how are our seminaries incorporating this awareness into their training of ministers?
8. Only 27 percent of clergy are addressing abuse issues in pre-marital counseling. How can we increase this number?
9. There is also room to grow Safe Church Policies and Our Whole Lives Curricula at the local church level.
10. Nearly half of the adult men show an interest in working to address violence against women, which should be incorporated into men's ministries.
11. Three times more clergy refer women to domestic violence resources than men to batterers' programs. How can we train clergy to be able to address more batterers?

**In short, the UCC has the capacity to be a significant influence in both pastoral care and healing for our own people as well as social change to help prevent sexual and domestic violence. There is support for the denomination to show leadership on these issues.**

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