Reprint of narrative section “The Faith Response” from the 2009 Georgia Domestic Violence Fatality Review Annual Report

Georgia Commission on Family Violence
Georgia Coalition Against Domestic Violence
Victims’ lives are complex and dangerous. They experience coercion, oppression, and victim blaming by the perpetrator and sometimes from the very systems designed to protect them. Victims, survivors, and surviving family members consistently turn to their faith communities for support and safety, whether they disclose the abuse or not. Unfortunately, while there are positive examples of faith communities in Georgia responding to domestic violence, many clergy and lay leaders are unprepared, untrained, and unable to provide safe and effective guidance and resources.

In the 9 Georgia cases we reviewed this year, 7 victims self-identified as Christian. The faith background of the other two is unknown. Four of the murder victims actively attended church, but only one told her faith leader* about the abuse. In addition, three of the victims had previously attended church, but had withdrawn from their congregations in the period before they were killed. This may have been due to the perpetrators’ successful efforts to isolate them; certainly the accumulated toll of violence and abuse was a factor. In all cases except one, it seems the nature and extent of the abuse were invisible to clergy and fellow congregants.** However, our research showed that even when the victim revealed the abuse to her faith leader, i.e., the abuse became visible, the victim did not receive the resources she needed to be safe. Also, 3 of the 9 homicide perpetrators had active connections with a church community when they killed their partners. This suggests the critical importance of faith communities in earlier intervention and homicide prevention.

Our research from 2004 to 2009 establishes faith communities as active agents in the lives of many people involved in domestic violence fatalities, so it is important to identify faith community responses to domestic violence that are safe and effective. It is also essential to learn what’s currently not working, and what can be done to better prepare faith communities to protect survivors in their congregations. Where it is safe to do so, communities need to require change from perpetrators. While a victim’s life and choices may be nuanced and dangerous, we know one thing: it is profoundly important for faith leaders and domestic violence advocates to cultivate mutual trust and collaboration so that they can respond more effectively to victims’ complex needs.

This section exposes some compelling and startling information about what faith communities know and sometimes do not know about domestic violence. While examining these findings, remember the complexities of

* We have found that when rabbis and other faith leaders speak out, they can make a big difference in assisting those suffering from abuse. It is imperative that our synagogues become sanctuaries of peace — that rabbis speak from the pulpit about abuse, that Jewish community leaders and educators create communities where survivors of abuse know that they are not alone.”

- Wendy Lipshutz
Shalom Bayit of Jewish Family & Career Services

* Our findings and assumptions here are based on the evidence we had access to, primarily law enforcement and legal records, interviews with family and friends, and the knowledge of review team members. This information is only partial and there may have been more contact with faith leaders and congregants than we are aware of. Family and friends may not necessarily know about victims’ full involvement with their faith communities. We did not conduct family or friend interviews in two of the nine cases.
survivors’ experiences and the obstacles they face both from the perpetrator and from the community. In some cases, one of these obstacles to safety is well-intentioned support from faith leaders.

Finding #1: The Complexity of Invisibility

Based on the evidence available to fatality review teams, only one homicide victim in the 9 cases we reviewed this year chose to talk with her clergy about the abuse she was suffering. It seems that no other victims revealed the abuse to faith leaders. As one mother said, her daughter and the perpetrator gave a “false picture” of happiness at church; the violence remained hidden. Such invisibility of abuse may support the belief by some faith leaders that abuse is not happening in their congregations. Unfortunately, this is unlikely to be true. According to the CDC’s Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System (BRFSS) in 2006 almost 1 in 3 women suffer physical abuse in their adult lifetime. (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC]. Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System Survey Data. Atlanta, Georgia: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2006.) The actual prevalence of abuse is likely to be much higher as this statistic does not include emotional or sexual abuse, or stalking. Abuse survivors are present in congregations, but they are choosing not to disclose the abuse they are suffering to clergy or fellow congregants in the majority of cases. This finding is supported by both our Fatality Reviews and independent research (Neergaard et al., “Women Experiencing Intimate Partner Violence: Effects of Confiding in Religious Leaders,” Pastoral Psychology 55, no. 6 [July 2007]: 783).

Why are so many survivors reluctant to disclose violence and abuse to faith leaders? As discussed, survivors’ lives can be convoluted, and there are many reasons why a survivor might not choose to disclose abuse to anyone, especially if the survivor would be in more danger from the perpetrator if she does so. Survivors likely consider many factors when deciding whether to disclose abuse to their faith communities. Is the perpetrator a leader in the congregation, and, if so, will the survivor be less likely to be believed? Will the congregational leaders use religious texts to support the perpetrator’s position, or recommend steps that may place the victim at greater risk, such as couples’ counseling? The fear of the consequences of disclosure is well founded. Research indicates that abused women who seek help from untrained clergy typically find themselves in a worse situation than before (Skiff et al., “Engaging the Clergy in Addressing the Impact of Partner Violence in their Faith Communities,” Journal of Spirituality In Mental Health 10, no. 2 [2008]: 104). The survivor may fear that the faith congregation will ostracize her or the perpetrator, or she may fear that the perpetrator will force the family to leave the congregation if the abuse becomes known. The perpetrator is likely to have isolated the survivor from many other supports already, so the prospect of being separated from her congregation may be terrifying to the survivor, as that isolation would put her in more danger. Notably, survivors (or perpetrators who) are members of oppressed populations may be reluctant to disclose abuse out of fear of additional abuse (or violence) they may experience as a result of their status. For example, a gay or lesbian victim (or perpetrator) who discloses

“The faith community must give permission for the harsh realities of domestic violence to be spoken in sacred space.”

-Rev. Dr. Anne Marie Hunter
Safe Havens Interfaith Partnership Against Domestic Violence

“As clergy, we need to get to know a domestic violence advocate, put her number in our cell phones, and call for support and advice whenever we address abuse in the communities we serve.”

-Rev. Sara Hayden
Tri-Presbytery New Church Development Commission
abuse to faith leaders who are not supportive of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Questioning, Intersex (LGBTQQI) communities may face additional ostracism or barriers to safety. An undocumented immigrant who is experiencing abuse may fear that disclosure to faith leaders may bring DFCS or law enforcement involvement leading to deportation. So, myriad factors militate against disclosure for many survivors. The reality is that abuse is often present in congregations, but remains hidden from clergy and faith leaders.

While the abuse may be invisible to clergy and faith leaders, some survivors describe being under constant scrutiny by the perpetrator. While the abuse they are suffering may be invisible to their faith community, their own lives are being monitored closely and controlled. Living under constant surveillance by the perpetrator may necessitate that the survivor not talk about the abuse to others. The perpetrator’s surveillance forces the victim to keep the abuse hidden. Members of oppressed groups sometimes describe their lives as being monitored closely by law enforcement agencies and other systems. At other times, they describe their invisibility within the wider social setting. Survivors who are members of oppressed groups may feel that their lives are being doubly scrutinized, both by the perpetrator and by the larger community.

How frequently do congregations take proactive steps that invite survivors to ask for help? Are there resources available in congregations for survivors who choose not to reveal the abuse? In the 9 Georgia cases we studied this year, we found no indication in legal documents or interviews with family and friends that faith leaders took steps to invite congregants to talk about domestic violence. From our interviews with family and friends, it seems domestic violence was not talked about from the pulpit or in smaller study groups. We found no evidence that domestic violence brochures or hotline numbers were posted anywhere, or that domestic violence information was available in the church libraries or in church bulletins. A homicide victim’s sister reported that the victim did not disclose the abuse she was suffering to anyone at church, but “no one was talking about it [domestic violence]…it was like they [the clergy and fellow congregants] didn’t want to know about it.”

“As a former domestic violence prosecutor and a current public interest civil attorney, I have had numerous cases where survivors dismissed their legal actions and their safety plans because their faith leaders advised against ending the relationships. Abusers seem to get the support in the courtroom, even when the abuse itself has occurred in the church parking lot. Survivors should not have to choose between their faith and their safety.”

-Jenni Stolarski
Atlanta Volunteer Lawyers Foundation

“As advocates we need to respect a survivor’s faith and build on it as a source of strength.”

-Jasmine Williams Miller
Partnership Against Domestic Violence

* Thanks to Rev. Dr. Anne Marie Hunter for her insights on this topic. See the following article for a more nuanced conversation about the intersection of visibility and invisibility with abuse and oppression: “Numbering the Hairs of Our Heads: Male Social Control and the All-Seeing Male God” by Anne Marie Hunter, Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion, Fall 1992, Volume 8, Number 2, pp. 7-26.
“I believe that violence will end in Muslim homes when Muslim men take greater responsibility for their actions and start to hold other men accountable and Muslim men really follow the Sunnah, the traditions and customs of Prophet Mohammad (PBUH) and learn how he treated his wives and children with love and honor.”

— Shyam Sriram
Muslim Men Against Domestic Violence

Outside research supports this finding: clergy rarely ask about or discuss abuse with congregants — either individually or from the pulpit (Skiff et al., “Engaging the Clergy,” 102). According to Rev. Dr. Anne Marie Hunter of Safe Havens Interfaith Partnership Against Domestic Violence, “Many clergy believe that domestic violence is not happening in their community because they never hear about it. In reality, if survivors are not talking about their experiences, it is usually because faith leaders have not created an atmosphere in which it is safe to disclose.”

It is critical that faith leaders take steps to send the proactive message that domestic violence is wrong, that no one should be abused, and that there are resources available for congregants who would like to disclose abuse they are suffering (or perpetrating). See “10 Things Your Congregation Can Do” on page 23 for specific steps to take. By talking about domestic violence and condemning it, faith leaders can send the signal to survivors that they are not alone and that it is safe to disclose the abuse if and when they choose to.

Finding #2:
Visibility Does Not Equal Sanctuary

Less frequently, the abuse becomes manifest, or partly so. Sometimes the survivor takes courageous steps to reveal the violence in her life. She makes the violence known. Or, sometimes, the perpetrator discloses his abuse, or his abuse becomes known through actions of the criminal legal system. Even when the abuse is visible, faith leaders still may not realize the danger that the survivor is in and they may not place primary importance on her safety. What are some of the reasons that faith leaders do not always recognize the danger and make safety the priority? As mentioned earlier, domestic violence is complex and nuanced. Faith leaders hear from their congregants about many life changes and struggles on a regular basis, including marital conflicts, pending divorces, job losses, and suicidal thoughts. In addition, firearms may be so common among congregants that the presence of firearms in situations where there is abuse may not raise red flags. It takes training and insight to tease out controlling patterns and indicators of danger and to distinguish between abuse and general conflict. Most clergy simply have not had access to this kind of training and information about lethality indicators. Without training, well-intentioned clergy may not realize that what the survivor discloses about the abuse is likely to be only the tip of the iceberg. She or he may not recognize lethality indicators and may decide that the survivor is simply describing “marital conflict,” when in fact the survivor is in real danger. Even when abuse becomes more apparent, some clergy may not see it as their role to “choose sides,” especially when both parties are members of their congregation.

Clergy may be loath to offend the survivor or the perpetrator by inquiring about abuse, and she or he may also be afraid of retaliation by the perpetrator, especially if that perpetrator is held in high regard by the congregation. Finally, clergy are not immune to the effects of living in a patriarchal society. In this context, men are valued over women and there is a cultural habit of discounting and downplaying women’s reports of struggles in their lives. Some clergy simply do not believe survivors’ reports of violence. All of these factors can lead to faith leaders failing to both recognize danger and prioritize survivors’ safety.
It is vital for members of the faith community to respond to abuse by prioritizing the safety of the survivor. What does it mean: “to prioritize a survivor’s safety?” A working relationship between faith leaders and domestic violence advocates is a critical step. However, that relationship is only a step, not an end point. No matter how well informed and intended, a faith leader and an advocate cannot create safety for a survivor without the survivor's leadership and direction. There is no externally imposed formula for her safety that the determined perpetrator cannot undermine. True safety must be designed and determined by the survivor. The survivor is the expert in her own situation. She may need information about her options and support, but clergy (and advocates) cannot simply tell the survivor what to do, for this replicates the perpetrator’s coercive tactics. The best practice is for the advocate and the survivor to create a plan that works for her. An advocate can assist a survivor to explore the questions that would help her determine what she needs and become more fully aware of her options for safety. As advocates help survivors work through this process, faith leaders can provide spiritual support and deconstruct any misreading of sacred texts that perpetrators use to justify abuse. Then, along the way, as the survivor makes choices, the faith leader and the advocate can ask her what she needs from them, and support her spiritually and materially in any way that makes sense to her. Also, when possible to do so safely, faith leaders can play an important role in working with others to hold perpetrators accountable and give them options for change and growth. This accountability work should only be done in close consultation with the advocate and the survivor after they have done considerable safety planning.

Tragically, one woman’s story from a review this year poignantly illustrates how abuse can become visible to clergy while safety still eludes the victim. In this case, Ann*, a devout Catholic, had been married to Bob* for 26 years. Bob did not attend church, but Ann rarely missed services. The parish priest, Rev. John, came to know Ann well when she approached him as she contemplated divorce. Ann struggled with the idea of divorce, but she was desperate for relief from abuse. During their conversations over a period of months, Ann disclosed important aspects of her relationship with Bob. Specifically, Rev. John learned that:

1. Bob was being physically and verbally abusive towards Ann, and the abuse was escalating;
2. Bob had threatened both homicide and suicide;
3. Bob had firearms;
4. Bob was possessive and had falsely accused Ann of infidelity;
5. Bob was stalking Ann;
6. Bob was abusing drugs and alcohol; and,
7. Ann had taken steps to separate, eventually filed for divorce, and had Bob removed from the house.

In response to Ann’s disclosures, Rev. John did not do or say any of the dangerous things that advocates fear. He did not tell her to pray harder or to go home and be a better wife. He did not oppose separation, and, while he did not openly support divorce, he supported Ann. In addition, Rev. John asked her if she was safe. According to Rev. John, she said that she was.

“A survivor is not only having a physical crisis, she is having a spiritual crisis as well. She needs someone to help her make sense of her situation through the lens of her faith.”

-FaithTrust Institute

* All names used in this section are pseudonyms.
When she told him this, he relaxed and, despite the lethality indicators above, said he had “no premonitions” of the violence to come.

Pivotaly, Rev. John had no pre-existing relationship with an advocate, and no domestic violence information on hand to give Ann. To the best of our knowledge, it did not occur to him to call a domestic violence organization for advice, or to refer Ann to an advocate. An advocate might have helped him think through questions that he could have asked Ann beyond “Are you safe?” so she could explore her options and think critically about the situation. Also, if he had known an advocate on a personal level, he might have been comfortable saying, “I know that you say that you’re safe, but I’m still concerned about your safety. I’m wondering if you’d be willing to call my friend at the domestic violence organization to do some safety planning and talk through your options?”

One morning, Ann called Rev. John and asked if she could meet with him. In their discussion, they talked about the ongoing abuse and her agonizing decision to divorce Bob. Ann then went into confession with Rev. John. When they came out, Rev. John said that he had never seen Ann so at peace with herself and God. He felt sure that she had decided at last to divorce Bob and she knew that God still loved her. Spiritually, her separation from Bob was now complete and she was at peace. That night, Bob killed Ann and then himself in front of their teenage daughter.

Rev. John was overwhelmed and stricken with grief. He agreed to meet with interviewers (one researcher and one advocate) in the hope of helping to keep this from happening to anyone else. Even upon reflection and with hindsight, Rev. John still did not see the feasibility of calling an advocate for advice, or suggesting to Ann that she call an advocate. “What more could I have done?” he asked. “I still can’t think of what else I could have done. The authorities were already involved [in the divorce process]. What else could I do?”

CONCLUSION

Steps towards a solution

One effective action that can help increase safety for domestic violence survivors is generating robust working relationships between faith leaders and advocates. When domestic violence and faith intersect, this alliance works as a powerful partnership for women’s safety and justice. Why is this relationship so important? And what are the elements of that relationship? Opposite are several key ways in which advocates can assist faith leaders.

Need more information on Georgia congregations that are addressing domestic violence in inspired ways?

Please contact GCFV or GCADV if you would like more information about congregations in Georgia that are already responding to domestic violence in innovative ways. Also, if your congregation is proactively addressing domestic violence, please let us know. We are working to identify innovative faith responses around the state.

“We should never ask a woman to choose between her faith and her safety. For a woman of faith, it’s an impossible choice.”

-FaithTrust Institute
How Advocates Can Help Clergy When Faith & Domestic Violence Intersect

1. Advocates can help faith leaders think critically about questions they can ask the survivor that would facilitate her process of pursuing safety (whether she chooses to leave the relationship or not).

2. Advocates can provide consultation to clergy to avoid potentially harmful faith responses, for example, pressure to engage in couples counseling, or other responses that could further undermine the survivor’s safety, breach her confidentiality, or isolate her from support.

3. Advocates can provide the survivor with free services such as safety planning, lethality assessment, support groups, legal advocacy, and connection to other resources.

4. Advocates can consult with the survivor and then help faith leaders think through whether it would be safe to confront the perpetrator and, if so, how that might be done in a way that prioritizes the survivor’s safety.

What Faith Leaders Can Do to Build Relationships with Domestic Violence Advocates

1. Reach out to a domestic violence organization and build a relationship with an advocate who will respect a survivor’s faith as a source of strength for her. Develop a mutual trust. Call the Georgia Coalition Against Domestic Violence (GCADV) at 404-209-0280 for help in identifying local and culturally-competent advocates.

2. Meet with the advocate and other members of the domestic violence organization for cross-training. Learn about the dynamics of abuse and available resources for survivors and perpetrators. Also, offer the organization information about your faith tradition, its statements about abuse, and any protocols for how you currently respond to domestic violence in your congregation.

3. Put the domestic violence organization’s name and number in your cell phone, both their 24-hour hotline number and their general number. When you become concerned about abuse or controlling behaviors in your congregation, call the organization for consultation about how to respond.

4. Once this relationship and cross-training are in place, do things in your congregation that invite disclosure of abuse and send the signals that this is a safe place for survivors (or perpetrators) to approach you privately for help. One easy step: Review 10 Things Your Congregation Can Do on page 23 and implement changes appropriate for your congregation.

For more information and resources about faith and abuse, including free sample sermons and bulletin inserts, please contact the FaithTrust Institute. www.faithtrustinstitute.org Telephone 206-634-1903
What Is a 'Domestic Violence Advocate' & How Do I Find One?

For the purpose of our discussion here, a domestic violence advocate is a person who works directly with domestic violence survivors and helps them achieve safety, self-determination, and justice. This advocate usually works in a domestic violence organization that can provide free 24-hour safety planning, legal advocacy, support groups, and in some cases, emergency housing. Most frequently, advocates are accessible through DHS-certified domestic violence organizations (commonly called “shelters”) that are located throughout the state. In addition, highly skilled advocates may also be available in other agencies and culturally specific organizations such as Raksha, Caminar Latino, Tapestri, Shalom Bayit of JF&CS, United 4 Safety, and some organizations that are not certified by DHS. If you would like more information about advocates and their role, or if you would like assistance in connecting with an advocate in your area, please call the Georgia Coalition Against Domestic Violence (GCADV) at 404-209-0280. For 24-hour help, call 1-800-33 HAVEN (1-800-334-2836), Georgia’s Domestic Violence Hotline.
Make Your Congregation A Safer Place for Those Experiencing Domestic Violence

1. Put up posters with 1-800-33 HAVEN (1-800-334-2836), Georgia’s Domestic Violence Hotline number, throughout your building. Print state and national hotline numbers in every program and/or newsletter.

2. Stock your library with culturally/religiously specific domestic violence information.

3. Get to know your community’s domestic violence resources and create a resource referral network. Refer, refer, refer.

4. Let members of your congregation know that domestic violence is an issue in your community through sermons, newsletter articles, programming, etc.

5. Let your congregants know that this is a safe place to discuss these issues.

6. Include domestic violence resources in pre-marital counseling.

7. Present information and resources on healthy relationships to teens.

8. Present age-appropriate anti-bullying information to children.

9. Partner with Georgia Coalition Against Domestic Violence to conduct a used cell phone drive to support survivors of abuse.

10. Contact the Georgia Commission on Family Violence (404-657-3412) or the Georgia Coalition Against Domestic Violence (404-209-0280) for training, ideas, and resources.

Adapted from Safe Havens Interfaith Partnership Against Domestic Violence, Boston, MA. Tel: 617-654-1820, web: www.interfaithpartners.org
Interfaith summit on domestic violence explores how clergy can work to support victims, end violence

by Sue Boardman, M.Div., D.Min., Special to Presbyterian News Service, PC(USA), reprinted with permission.

ATLANTA. Faith leaders gathered in Atlanta, GA, on Tuesday, November 17, for a Summit on Domestic Violence to equip religious leaders with skills necessary to respond effectively to issues of domestic violence. The Summit was organized by the Georgia Coalition Against Domestic Violence (GCADV) and the Georgia Commission on Family Violence (GCFV) after their Fatality Review Project research uncovered strong connections between faith communities and victims in fatal and near-fatal incidents of domestic violence.

More than 50 faith leaders came to the summit; male and female; black, white, Latino, and Asian; young and older; Roman Catholic, Baptist, Presbyterian, Episcopalian, Jewish, Muslim, Hindu, and Baha’i. Experts from Seattle’s FaithTrust Institute provided leadership. “More women go to their clergy person than to law enforcement officers to make first reports of domestic violence,” said Rabbi Mark Dratch. “People define their lives in terms of their faith community. We have the opportunity and a biblical mandate to give help, or we are perpetuating abuse.”

The Rev. Sharon Ellis Davis, Ph.D., a United Church of Christ pastor who teaches at McCormick Theological Seminary, spoke about the pressure many victims perceive from religious leaders to remain in an abusive marriage. She explained that, on average, women leave abusive partners seven times before they finally leave or are killed by their abuser. “The most danger a victim faces is at the time of leaving,” she said. “In 75 percent of all domestic violence fatalities, the woman was actively leaving the relationship.” Broken Vows, a video produced by the FaithTrust Institute, presented the stories of six battered women of different faiths whose religious teachings were misused in their own lives to perpetuate abuse. “If there is arguing, fighting, and hitting in the family,” said a Jesuit priest in the video, “we can expect it in the streets. If we want to stop it in the streets, we have to stop it at home.”

Summit participants joined in an exercise in which Jewish, Muslim, and Christian scriptures were examined for the ways in which they could either be used as roadblocks to confronting violence in the family or as resources for victims of violence. Jessica Davenport, a young domestic violence victim and active member of a faith community, raised the question of the extent to which religious leaders have a responsibility to critique oppressive teachings that seem to permit domestic violence. Yolanda Davis, a recently ordained pastor in the African Methodist Episcopal church, said, “It might not be that we’re so afraid to challenge the reading of scripture as it is that we’re afraid to challenge power in church leaders who may be abusers themselves.” “Our job,” said Ellis Davis, “is the deconstruction of roadblocks and the reconstruction of resources.” Quoting from Battered Women: From a Theology of Suffering to an Ethic of Empowerment (Joy Bussert, 1986) she went on, “We need ... to begin articulating a faith that will provide women with resources for strength rather than resources for endurance. We must articulate a theology of empowerment rather than a theology of passive endurance.”

FaithTrust’s Rabbi Julie Schwartz advocated speaking about domestic violence from pulpits and in the prayers of the people as a crucial first step for faith communities. “We need theological clarity that domestic violence has nothing to do with religion,” she said. “It’s all about power and control. You can’t use your religion to say violence is OK.” Schwartz offered three other goals for intervention in family violence by religious leaders.

1. First, provide safety for victims and children. Go with them to court. Honor protective orders. Know how to refer victims to domestic violence programs and trained community advocates, rather than to traditional couples’ counseling.

2. Second, insist on accountability for the perpetrator. Support fulfillment of legal consequences of violence. Have clear guidelines for perpetrators who wish to remain in the faith community. Support the abuser in seeking specialized perpetrators’ intervention programs to help change violent behavior and offer safety for the perpetrator as well as the victim, through establishing appropriate boundaries.

3. Third, assist in the restoration of the relationship, if appropriate, or provide for the mourning of the lost relationship through prayers, rituals, and pastoral care.

Co-coordinator Greg Loughlin said that when they’d begun planning the summit, they wondered where the faith community had gone with regard to domestic violence. “We thought stuff wasn’t going on. Instead, there’s wonderful stuff. People are doing the work. You are doing the work,” he said. “What we need are connections between those people and momentum for the future.”

According to FaithTrust founder the Rev. Dr. Marie M. Fortune, “There can be no healing without justice and justice requires courage.”