

## Barriers to Response

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It is not easy or simple to address the issue of Domestic Abuse, especially within the context of the Faith Community. **Here are some barriers that may be standing in the way:**

### **Domestic Violence is not occurring in any families in our Faith Community:**

Statistics compiled by national Domestic Violence agencies consistently show that Domestic Violence in the home takes place in every social and economic class and that up to 1 in 4 women are abused at some point in their lives. The issue is not if but whom. Part of the problem is that those who are abused are fearful and shamed. Silence is a part of the pattern of abuse. If the Faith Community provides a safe environment, the victims may be able to disclose their pain, but the fact that no one is talking about problems in their home does not indicate that abuse does not exist in the households of your Faith Community.

### **The Faith Community should not invade the privacy of the family**

The Faith Community has long supported teachings and practices that directly influence family behaviors when it comes to birth, illness, divorce and death and use of resources of time, talent and treasure. The Faith Community responds, often without being directly asked or invited, when someone is ill, hospitalized, or homebound. Privacy and confidentiality are part of the clerical vows that religious leaders exercise to protect members with vulnerable issues and assist them in making healthy and beneficial choices.

### **Marriage vows are sacred and marriages should be preserved at all cost**

The vows are not greater than the persons who take them. While sacred and binding, they do not guarantee the behavior of the individual. When abuse is taking place, the covenant of love and mutual affection that the vows protect has been violated and the marriage is in danger of being destroyed. Pretending that the vows will somehow protect both the abuser and the abused does nothing to help both individuals honor each other and their promise to God.

### **The harm that is taking place may be exaggerated**

Both the abused and the abuser will tend to minimize rather than exaggerate the extent of the harm and violence that is taking place. The abused are fearful, intimidated and ashamed to admit that domestic violence is taking place. They may not want to recognize or admit to their Faith Community friends or clergy that their marriage is less than ideal. The abusers, when confronted, will minimize their behaviors as justifiable because of stress, normal difficulties or misunderstandings or one-time outbursts. If abuse is suspected, it is probably occurring.

### **A minister should not "take sides" between two parishioners since the minister is called to serve all**

By failing to respond, the minister is taking the side of the abuser. By failing to raise the issue of Domestic Abuse and teaching about its characteristics and effects, the Faith Community ignores the harm to the larger community. Addressing the issue may help those who are potential victims learn to recognize the signs of abusive relationships before they are caught up in the cycle of violence. Counseling a couple where

abuse is suspected is an occasion where clergy are strongly urged to seek to refer the couple to a trained domestic violence expert.

### **A local congregation lacks the training or expertise to effectively help victims of Domestic Violence**

While this may initially be true, it does not have to remain true. Effective help begins with awareness, with making appropriate resources available, and with the refusal to remain silent. Training programs are available from local Domestic Violence programs and most Faith Community judicatories have trained leaders who will come when invited to lead workshops or meet with Faith Community groups.

### **The issue of Domestic Violence in our society is a societal, legal, and political issue, not a spiritual one, and therefore outside the direct domain of the Faith Community**

Domestic violence damages the spirit of the abused and the abuser. The Faith Community is called to “set captives free” from the control of sin and death. Domestic violence results in the death of three women every day and some estimates say that almost 1 million incidents of violence occur against a current or former spouse, boyfriend or girlfriend per year. (NDVD statistics on Abuse in America) The Faith Community is called to serve the weak and vulnerable. How humans treat one another is the one of the greatest witnesses to the power of hope, love and life.

### **Male pre-eminence is sanctioned by Sacred Texts and Faith Community tradition**

Men who abuse women often believe in the extreme stereotype of male/female roles and twist sacred texts to fit their preconceived notions. Mutual agreement or vows that form a partnership or marriage do not erase the commandment and “golden rule” to do unto others as you would have them do to you. Although America’s laws uphold the separation of Faith Community and State, abuse of any human being is not a protected right, but a legal and moral wrong.

### **Interpersonal violence has always existed and the Faith Community has limited power to influence what is an individual responsibility.**

When a community of faith offers a community response, a place of safety is created where the victims can seek help and protection. Perpetrators of abuse need the silence of a community in order to pursue their destructive behavior. When the community message challenges destructive behavior, abusers may be limited or in some cases guided into admitting their responsibility and seeking help to end their destructive behavior. Victims who hear consistent messages of hope and affirmation are offered options and paths out of the cycle of violence