



Roy Bishop

Supporting survivors of domestic abuse

Have you ever thought that, for some people, home could be a prison of fear?

I have counselled numerous women over the years in abusive relationships, and have been moved and challenged by their experiences, resilience, and bravery. Recently some words in a book leaped out from the page at me, as they drew parallels I recognized all too well: between 'battered women and political prisoners; between the survivors of vast concentration camps created by tyrants who rule nations, and the survivors of small, hidden concentration camps created by tyrants who rule their homes.'¹

Have you thought that someone who attends your church may actually regard their home like this; seeing themselves as a prisoner, in their own concentration camp? Penned in with little hope of escape or change; forgotten, unseen or neglected by an outside world with whom they are forbidden to communicate; making the best of a very bad situation for themselves and their children? For many women this has become the

story of their lives. Thank God their plight is receiving more attention; and there is potential for change.

Imagine a woman coming to talk with you whose life feels just like this. To you she may look like any other woman in your fellowship; but inside she is afraid, not only of life at home (for herself and her children if she has any), but also of how you will receive her or respond to her plea for help and for someone to listen, to take her story seriously. She knows her husband, partner or boyfriend may also be known to you - but you never see him in his prison uniform. He only parades in front of the world wearing his dress uniform.

All of us bring baggage from our past to our personal relationships; so, when we try to respond to any such cry for help, it is unwise to jump to conclusions about the cause, or its solution.

Situations presented to you may not be as 'black and white' as I've suggested above. But do resolve to see what is presented to you through the eyes of the person who believes she, or he, is subject

to abuse in the home. Do not let your own pre-suppositions, fears, or your reluctance to think the worst, obscure the truth.

What is domestic abuse?

The topic of domestic abuse is huge. Much has been written about its effects on women and their children, and the damage it brings to our communities. You may already be aware of the problem, but I hope what follows may be helpful should a 'prisoner' in your church approach you. (The vast majority of abuse is against women by men, and although it happens the other way round too, I will refer mainly to women from now on for simplicity.)

The following definition appears in the Domestic Abuse Pack for Churches, produced by Restored:²

Domestic abuse is the abuse of a person physically, sexually, psychologically, spiritually, emotionally, socially or financially within an intimate or family type relationship that forms a pattern of coercive and controlling behaviour. This can include forced marriage and so called 'honour crimes'. Domestic abuse is also known as domestic violence.

Abusers may have many ways of maintaining this domination:

Physically, abusers may slap, punch, push, burn, or bite, to get their way. They may break their partner's possessions, or force them to take alcohol or drugs. They may do anything which will give them a hold on their partner; anything to intimidate and dominate. Note that we are considering a 'pattern of coercive and controlling behaviour' here, rather than just a single incident; but always listen to the victim's perspective rather than jump to your own conclusions as to how much is happening.

Sexually, abusers may force their partners to engage in any sexual act, without consent, at a time and place of their choosing. They may force them to have sex with someone else, or to perform sexual acts in front of the children. Abusers may also use sex as a weapon by withholding or refusing sexual activity.

Psychologically, abusers may shout, swear, frighten, blame, or challenge their partner's thinking, credibility, decisions, or ability to make decisions. Or, they may threaten suicide or self-harm. They may

also require their partner to account for how she has spent all of her time since he left the house (the prison).

Spiritually, abusers may say 'God hates you'; may use faith or the Bible as a way to dominate and terrorise; may demand forgiveness; may not allow their partner to go to church, or only to the church he stipulates.

Emotionally, abusers will manipulate; plead for forgiveness; declare love; and encourage the victim to believe she is somehow responsible for his actions.

Socially, abusers may ridicule their partners in front of friends and family, belittle them, humiliate them, and isolate them from other people.

Financially, an abuser may control all the family money so that the partner has no money she can call her own, requiring her to account for every penny spent. Meanwhile he indulges whatever takes his fancy, and takes no responsibility for managing finances in the home.

Neglect is another weapon in the abuser's armoury. He may only spend time with his partner when he wants something to satisfy himself.

Who is the domestic abuser?

It could be anyone; it could be the person you least expect. You may only see him on parade when he looks smart and says all the right things, while his wife, partner or girlfriend stands dutifully at his side. Abusers come in all shapes and sizes, from many different social, educational, religious and ethnic backgrounds. He may be rich or poor, educated or uneducated, young or old; he may be a 'family man', a church leader or a man of no faith, a businessman or a labourer.

Editors note: It is important to note that both sexes can be victims or perpetrators of domestic abuse. Whilst more victims of domestic abuse are female, the Crime Survey for England and Wales in 2020 found that an estimated 750,000 men had experienced domestic abuse in the previous year. This article is primarily written from the perspective of male perpetrated abuse towards women, but could also be applied to male victims.

But anyone who becomes aware of an abusive relationship and does not take it seriously may also contribute to the problem. Victims of abuse are hurt, not only by the perpetrator, but by those who remain indifferent to their situation.

Where and when does domestic abuse happen?

Generally behind closed doors - in secret - in the family home. Even so, children pick up far more than we adults sometimes think, and will see and hear what is going on between their parents. (The book *Kids Who Carry Our Pain* gives clear insight into the effects on children of abuse and rows between parents³; see also Appendix B.)

In the UK a woman is assaulted in her own home every six seconds. But abuse is not confined to the home. An abuser will also humiliate his victim in public (or intimidate her by threatening to do so), so as to continue his domination. He may belittle her in front of her friends, her work colleagues, or in any social setting, while at the same time elevating his position or standing in their eyes.

Abuse can happen at any time and any place. It can be spontaneous, completely out of the blue. But there can often be a pattern of behaviour that leads up to it, which may be difficult for the abused person (or anyone else) to recognise. For example: 1) Tension builds in the abuser, who may become moody or critical. In response the woman may try to nurture him, while feeling as though she is walking on eggshells. 2) The abusive incident happens, during which she may try to calm him down or reason with him in attempts to protect herself. 3) The abuser may beg forgiveness, say sorry, and offer to seek counselling or anger management. The woman responds by agreeing to stay, or have him back, and sets up the counselling, feeling relieved yet confused. But an abuser may often not follow up with the counselling, thinking he doesn't need it; rather he will give the impression that he has changed, but in reality is still looking for another chance to reinstate his domination.

Like the ripples from a stone thrown into a pond, the effects of this violence can spread into every

relationship; those close to the victim are especially likely to suffer. For example, the victim - not wanting to expose herself to what she may see as the shame of public scrutiny - may unburden herself on her children; this is understandable, but it's not helpful for children to carry this burden.

Why does domestic abuse happen?

Various reasons have been put forward, such as abusive childhood, poor role models, or alcohol or drugs. The abusers themselves may look for any excuse to justify their behaviour: 'She made me do it', 'She was asking for it', 'I didn't mean to hit her that hard', 'I was only joking', and 'She is too sensitive'. In the end, the reality is that men choose to commit violence.

For many men the issue is a cultural one. Because of their traditional background or religion they may have a very low estimation of the value of a woman. Even in the Christian faith some Bible texts have been taken out of context to justify the domination of women, such as 'Wives submit to your husbands'. But in his book *Why Does He Do That?*⁴ Lundy Bancroft suggests from many years' experience that the main reason a man abuses his wife is he believes he is entitled to do so, and regards her as his possession:

1. He believes his thinking is superior to that of his partner
2. He feels entitled, and it is his right, to have power over her
3. This leads to unreasonable expectations (because his partner can never follow all his rules or meet his demands)
4. His anger is justified; but in contrast he uses his partner's anger to prove she is irrational
5. He considers himself to be above reproach, so reacts strongly to his partner's anger
6. He is convinced his partner is there for him, to listen and pander to him - not the other way around
7. Often he sees his partner as an object - not as a human being - and treats her as such
8. Some men will say they 'lost control', but the truth is that they do not. Usually they are ready with a plausible explanation when the

police arrive at their door, alerted by a neighbour to yet another 'domestic'.

Domestic violence damages the woman, the children who are born or raised in this captivity, family life, and the community generally; and it is not honouring to God.

How can we reduce the amount of domestic violence?

- By becoming aware of it, and recognising the possibility that it can and does happen anywhere. (See Appendix A for some facts and figures.)
- By acknowledging it when you preach. The very fact that you do so may encourage one of your hearers to come and talk to you about her (or his) situation.
- By taking it off the list of topics never addressed in your church.
- By becoming better informed about the topic, and the services available locally to women who have been abused.
- By downloading 'Ending Domestic Abuse', a resource pack for churches produced by 'Restored', a Christian charity established to address this issue. Their website, www.restoredrelationships.org, has more information and stories of women who have experienced abusive relationships.
- By familiarising yourself and other church leaders with the resources available in your denomination. The Anglican Church has produced a very good booklet *Responding to Domestic Abuse*. The Baptist Union also has an interesting website with useful information; see www.baptist.org.uk.
- By recognising that the church has a role to play at this significant time. (See below for the government paper 'Call to End Violence against Women and Girls - Action Plan'.⁵)
- By establishing a Domestic Abuse Charter in your church; contact Restored for information.

How can we support survivors of domestic abuse?

Supporting survivors of all forms of abuse means:

- Letting them know that you take what they say seriously. It is not enough merely to acknowledge it and move on to a more comfortable topic of conversation. But it is also inappropriate to interrogate or to question extensively.
- Listening well and making notes, using the survivor's own words, as soon afterwards as you can; and keeping them secure for possible future use.
- Having information available ahead of time about how to contact emergency help, such as local Women's Aid groups (see Appendix C).
- Prayerfully encouraging the woman to make her own choices. Avoid contacting the police or authorities without first obtaining her permission to do so. Obviously if she is badly injured or facing immediate danger you will have to act; but otherwise, always seek to let her make the decision. If you act on your own initiative, you could be making a bad situation worse; the abuser may simply deny everything, and she will return to her prison on her own, to face the music alone.
- Not minimising what she says (this is what her abuser does).

Be aware that anyone talking to you may be opening up for the first time, and may possibly be testing the water to see how you respond.

Be aware too that abuse and trauma attack an individual's identity, causing considerable confusion. A woman who begins a relationship with high hopes of living happily ever after may soon become disillusioned, while at the same time being reluctant to face the truth of her situation. Abusers can get away with it so long because their victims are afraid, or believe somehow that they are the cause of the problem, and so remain silent. Or, clinging to their dream of a better future, she excuses her partner's behaviour:

- He didn't mean to hurt me - he just lost control.
- He can be so sweet and gentle.
- He frightens me sometimes but he never hurts the children; he's a good dad.
- He had a really bad childhood - it's been hard

for him.

- He does his best.
- He always says sorry afterwards, and tries to make it up with me.

(Amnesty International report that on average there will have been 35 assaults before a victim of domestic abuse calls the police.)

Do not encourage the survivor to 'forgive and forget' and move on.

If she says she is thinking of divorce, don't quote the first half of Malachi 2: "16, 'I hate divorce,' says the Lord God of Israel', without considering the implications of the second half, "'and I hate a man's covering himself with violence as well as with his garment,'" says the Lord Almighty.' She needs space and time to think through her situation and position. She may feel the choices open to her are very limited; don't restrict them further.

Be aware that a woman and her children are at greater risk when she is getting close to leaving her husband, partner or boyfriend. If he knows she is talking with someone, he may begin to fear he is going to lose her, and take drastic measures to prevent that happening.

Remember that if she and her partner come to your church together, you may only see him in his dress uniform.

Do not tell the abuser she has talked with you without first obtaining her permission. If you do you may make her situation worse. Using the prison analogy, it's easy to see that a guard observing a prisoner communicating with someone on the outside will take action to stop it and prevent an escape.

Do not be in a hurry to offer marriage counselling to support someone who is being abused by her partner. If you do, she may feel that you have not really listened to her cry for help, or that her partner was right after all and she is somehow responsible for what she has endured - an added source of pain. The abuser alone is responsible for his actions, and if there is an opportunity for him to avoid responsibility he will. Every marriage relationship has room for improvement, but often to suggest couples-counselling in an abusive relationship may merely provide the perpetrator

more tools with which to manipulate his wife.

Bear in mind too that, if she tells her partner that her church leader suggests they should come for counselling, the perpetrator could perhaps respond angrily, making her suffer for acting without his permission. Or, he may agree to come with her, providing she says only what he permits, and that she does not indicate at all what the real problem is. During the course of a 'couples meeting' he may gain insights into his wife's fears or aspirations for herself or her children, and use them later to maintain his control and domination. Or, the couple may come together initially, perhaps because the perpetrator has decided to use his wife's suggestion to gain some credibility with you. It can be very difficult to recognise these patterns when they happen; so one possibility is to see each of them separately.

Because they believe they have an inherent right to behave as they do, many abusers will not want to change, whatever the evidence or argument put before them - church members included. They will not consider change unless they realise the consequences of continuing their behaviour, including the possibility of prison or probation, or exclusion from a community. The real, imminent possibility of losing their wife or children may motivate some; but bear in mind that, until lasting change has occurred in his thinking, the perpetrator will still want to dominate his wife or partner. Real change takes time, and only the victim can validate her perpetrator's claims to have changed. The organisation Respect (which accredits some perpetrator programmes) recommends a minimum of 75 hours work with perpetrators, over at least 30 weeks. In abusive relationships much work very often needs to be done before joint marriage counselling can be appropriate.

However, do consider referring *her* to a counsellor. This should be done carefully, and with respect. Do not think that you should talk about referral as soon as she begins to talk with you. She may see that as rejection, or as confirmation of the lies sown by her perpetrator that 'No one would want to listen to you'. At an appropriate time ask if she would like to talk to someone who has more experience than you in these matters.

Always let her have control of the decisions about what happens next. The opportunity to make her own decisions without an unpredictable backlash will be unfamiliar territory for her, and so will require patience on your part. A trusting relationship will be vital.

At the same time ensure she has good 'support' in the fellowship. Again, after asking her what support she has, you could suggest someone you trust who will treat her with respect and dignity, and who is able to keep confidences. The choice always has to be hers. It is not necessary for everyone to know her situation or to learn of it at the prayer meeting - she can tell people she trusts, and ask them to pray when she is ready.

If you are a man reading this you may think it is better for her to talk with a woman; but do not overlook the fact she has chosen to speak with you. It may be more of a problem for you than it is for her, so tread carefully. She may benefit from talking to a man who respects and listens to her; but a woman who is being abused is vulnerable, so it is important to protect honourable relationships. Certainly ask if she might find it easier to talk to a woman; but do so without hinting in any way that you are not interested, and respect her wishes. Do not compromise your reputation, or hers, by making unwise suggestions. Avoid intimate physical contact, e.g. by putting your arm around her if she cries, or any contact or situation which could be misinterpreted. Think carefully about where you talk with her. Maybe your office at church could be appropriate, but not her home or yours unless someone else is at least in the building, and knows you are talking together. Give her the option to have someone sit in while you talk with her, and never sit between her and the door blocking her escape route - this could be very significant for her. As a minimum always have someone in the same building when counselling a woman, and let her know.

The following extract appeared in TAG magazine⁶, and whilst it was written to illustrate the difficulties of a different group of people in communicating their plight, it can be helpful to bear in mind for all who are traumatised and abused:

Ten reasons why I did not tell:

1. No one asked.
2. I did not know it was happening.
3. They told me not to tell, and I wanted to be good.
4. They told me not to tell, and said they would kill me if I did.
5. There was no one to tell.
6. I deserved what was happening.
7. No one would believe me.
8. No one would do anything about it.
9. I did not want anyone to know.
10. I did not have the words to tell.

Having read this paper you may feel overwhelmed, that the task of supporting a survivor of domestic abuse is too big and there is nothing you can do. You may wish it would go away, but you know it won't. The obscenity of the concentration camp may be closer than you had realised. Please do not despair. The women and children are looking for someone to recognise their situation, to value them as those made in the image of God, to acknowledge their pain and suffering, and to do something about it. As church leaders we have a significant role in working to end this appalling state of affairs. The resources here can give you insights into the world of the prisoner and the guard; you are better informed, which will help you be more receptive to the cries of hurting people. The safety of women and children should be high on our list of priorities. Don't be fooled by a well-dressed prison guard; listen to the woman.

LISTEN, LISTEN, LISTEN!

And as we said at the beginning, while the vast majority of abuse is against women by men, it certainly does happen the other way round (and in same-sex relationships too). All you have read thus far can apply to men who are being abused by their partners. Bear in mind that many men would find it even harder to admit to being abused or battered by their partners, and to ask for help.

So how can we reduce the amount of domestic violence? No amount of good intentions,

articles and statistics will change this situation unless we actively engage with the topic; and that includes you the reader, and me the author. Violence against women is a worldwide tragedy, affecting millions of people; so pray for change. Christian men have a vital role in addressing the situation; they can be the dynamic for change through the church. 'First Man Standing' has been formed to help men be first in their family, club, church or workplace to stand up and speak out about building strong relationships and ending violence against women. Have a look at www.restoredrelationships.org/firstmanstanding for more information.



At the time of original writing, **Roy Bishop** was accredited by the Association of Christian Counsellors as an Emeritus Counselling Practitioner/Supervisor, and facilitated ACC Pastoral Skills Course in UK and Sierra Leone. He was also a trainer with Crisis Care Training International (www.crisiscaretraining.org), and an elder with Kennet Valley Free Church in Reading (www.kvfc.org.uk). Following a heart attack in 2016, he retired from formal activities.

About Living Leadership

Living Leadership exists to help Christian leaders live in Christ joyfully and serve him faithfully. Find out more about our ministry, and access more useful articles, on our website: www.livingleadership.org

Notes:

1. *Trauma and Recovery- from domestic abuse to political freedom*, by Judith Lewis Herman (Pandora, 2001), p.3.
2. www.restoredrelationships.org. What follows is adapted from the Women's Aid definition of domestic violence.
3. *Kids Who Carry Our Pain*, by Dr Robert Hemfelt and Dr Paul Warren (Word). One premise of this book is that children who witness rows and expressions of abuse in their parents' relationship will pick up some of that unresolved tension or pain, and will not know what to do with it. If you can remember entering a room where two or more people have been arguing vehemently and you sensed the atmosphere, then you will have some idea of what the authors are referring to. In that situation, as an adult, you make a quick judgement on whether to speak, stay, or leave, using your adult faculties and experience. Children have neither the experience to make that sort of decision, nor often the resources to leave or to contribute as peacemakers; so they are left 'holding the pain'.
4. *Why Does He Do That?* by Lundy Bancroft (Penguin).
5. 'Call to End Violence Against Women and Girls - Action Plan' - government paper published March 2011. Page 1 says that the Government will encourage all spheres of society to be part of a wider movement to take action. The paper's guiding principle is to prevent violence against women and girls from happening in the first place by challenging the attitudes and behaviours which foster it, and intervening early wherever possible to prevent it. The full document can be downloaded free at www.official-documents.gov.uk and www.homeoffice.gov.uk/vawg.
6. Trauma and Abuse Group; see www.tag-uk.net.

Appendix A

Some facts and figures

(from www.womensaid.org.uk)

- Domestic violence accounts for between 16% and 25% of all recorded violent crime.
- One incident is reported to the police every minute.
- 45% of women and 26% of men have experienced at least one incident of inter-personal violence in their lifetime. However, when there were more than four incidents (i.e. ongoing domestic or sexual abuse), 89% of victims were women.
- In any one year, there are 13 million separate incidents of physical violence or threats of violence against women from partners or former partners.
- Women are much more likely than men to be the victims of multiple incidents of abuse, and of sexual violence: 32% of women who had ever experienced domestic violence did so four (or more) times, compared with 11% of the (smaller number) of men who had ever experienced domestic violence; and, again, women constituted 89% of all those who had experienced four or more incidents of domestic violence.
- Women are more likely than men to have experienced all types of intimate violence (partner abuse, family abuse, sexual assault and stalking) since the age of 16. And nearly half the woman who had experienced intimate violence of any kind, were likely to have been victims of more than one kind of intimate abuse.
- 54% of UK rapes are committed by a woman's current or former partner.
- On average two women a week are killed by a male partner or former partner: this constitutes around one third of all female homicide victims.

Appendix B

Impact of Domestic Violence on Children

- At least 750,000 children a year witness domestic violence.
- Children who live with domestic violence are at increased risk of behavioural problems and emotional trauma, and mental health difficulties in adult life.
- Nearly three quarters of children on the 'at risk' register live in households where domestic violence occurs, and 52% of child protection cases involve domestic violence.
- In 75% to 90% of incidents of domestic violence, children are in the same or the next room.
- The link between child physical abuse and domestic violence is high, with estimates ranging between 30% to 66% depending upon the study.

Appendix C

Domestic Abuse Resources

The National Domestic Violence Helpline: a national, 24-hour helpline for women experiencing domestic violence, their family, friends, colleagues and others calling on their behalf: 0808 2000 247.

Women's Aid: Women's Aid is working to end domestic violence against women and children. They support a network of domestic and sexual violence services across the UK.

England: www.womensaid.org.uk

Scotland: www.scottishwomensaid.org.uk

Wales: www.welshwomensaid.org

Northern Ireland: www.niawf.org

Refuge: Refuge's network of safe houses provides emergency accommodation for women and children when they are most in need: www.refuge.org.uk.

National Centre for Domestic Violence: A free, fast emergency service for survivors of domestic violence, enabling them to apply for an injunction within 24 hours of first contact (in most circumstances): 0844 804 4999 or www.ncdv.org.uk.

The National Stalking Helpline: practical advice and information for anyone currently or previously affected by harassment or stalking: 0300 636 0300 or www.stalkinghelpline.org.

Faith and Freedom enables Christian organisations and individuals to address domestic abuse issues: www.faithandfreedom.webs.com.

Restored is an international Christian alliance working to transform relationships and end violence against women: www.restoredrelationships.org.

Peace and Safety in the Christian Home (PASCH) is an international coalition of men and women promoting peace and safety in Christian homes: www.peaceandsafety.com.

Christian Coalition Against Domestic Abuse (CCAOA) are committed to ending all abuse in the community and helping those affected by abuse. They desire that every woman, man and child is safe and enjoying the respectful and honouring relationships that God intends: www.ccada.org!default.aspx.

Religion and Violence Learning (RAVE) is an initiative that seeks to bring knowledge and social action together to assist families of faith impacted by abuse: www.theraveproject.org.

Against Violence and Abuse (AVA) provides a range of domestic abuse services to UK-based organisations and agencies working in the voluntary and statutory sectors as well as to individual practitioners: www.avaproject.org.uk.