

WHY WE MAY NOT SEE DOMESTIC VIOLENCE



Many who experience domestic violence will not turn to clergy for help. Nor will they come forward in congregations where abuse within families is never discussed, victim-blaming is the norm, or the message preached is hardly "Good News." In fact, some supposed-religious beliefs actually may make family members more likely to be abusive or abused.

Thirty-five percent of married couples experience domestic violence within the first year of marriage. Though that statistic may not be exactly the same in our congregations, *some* of those couples *are our parishioners*. So why don't we "see" this abuse within relationships?

- Some of us may be in denial that anyone in our congregation could be so cruel and dangerous. Or maybe we've dealt with so many families in crisis, we don't want to "see" any more pain.
- We may not know much about domestic violence, and therefore not know how to respond or be of help. Our congregants realize that.
- We may be hesitant to speak about the issue and therefore members assume that this behavior is normal or they are the only ones with the problem. *Our* silence may keep victims silent.
- We may not realize that cultural theology often has more influence than our own. For example, many parishioners believe cultural clichés are actually scripture. For example, we may hear "God never gives you more than you can bear" (instead of God will be with you through anything), "Suffer in silence" (instead of ask and you will receive), and "Have the patience of Job" (instead of suffering was not God's will for Job nor anyone else). Beliefs such as these, if not countered by the Good News, increase couples' vulnerability to abusive patterns.

Addressing the prevalence of domestic violence is a crucial aspect of our ministries. Call Kyros Ministry to learn more about the problem of domestic violence and how you and your congregation can help couples in crisis.

Signs to Look for in Pre-marital Counseling

Although partner violence affects 33% of dating relationships, what couple is going to openly describe abusive behavior to the minister performing the wedding ceremony? Victims may be so intimidated by their fiancés that they make only "appropriate" comments, explains Kyros Associate Grady Kase, LCSW, BCD. So clergy must watch and listen for controlling behavior and unbalanced power in the couple's relationship. Simply asking, "How do you fight or resolve disagreements?" is not enough.

Does one person interrupt or speak for the other, express unrealistic expectations or jealousy, overreact to relatively minor incidents, or blame others for his or her own problems? Did the couple rush to live together or become engaged in less than six months? Has one person cut the other off from resources, family or friends, increasing isolation? Are there harsh words, rigid sex roles and sudden changes in mood? Is there a history of previous threats, breaking objects, or force?

If a minister senses power and control are not balanced and flexible within the relationship, Grady recommends meeting with each of the individuals separately. Similarly, domestic violence specialists strongly warn against couple's counseling if abuse is apparent. Otherwise one partner will not challenge the "truth" of the other and abuse may escalate if anything is said that the abuser finds offensive.