

Why Should Male Ministers Preach On Domestic Violence?

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For years many church leaders have operated from the basic orientation that Domestic Violence is a women's issue. Within the Presbyterian Church (USA), the issue emerged through the Office of Women's Ministry. In a rather subtle and dismissive way church male leadership has frequently assumed that within our denomination there are women specialists who address the cases of domestic violence that emerge from time to time around the denomination. In so doing, we make the assumption that family violence is adequately addressed within our congregations. Nothing could be farther from the truth.

1. The problem of Domestic Violence is not just "a women's issue." DV affects the whole family including children and the perpetrator. Family violence impacts the whole congregation and the larger community and it is reaching epidemic proportions. Currently, one-in-five women will become victims of violence in their lifetime and most of this violence occurs within the context of intimate family relationships. The odds are very strong that in every congregation there are families that have been impacted by domestic violence. The larger the church, the greater the number of families that are impacted.
2. The presence of family violence is more wide spread within our churches than pastors can easily recognize. Five years ago when my congregation designated a local domestic violence center as the recipient of the local share of the PC(USA) Peacemaking Offering, the director of a local shelter spoke as part of the Sunday Worship Minute for Mission. That afternoon five church members independently made contact with the shelter director asking for help as victims of DV. I learned that day that victims of DV do not assume that the church will help them if they never hear about the issue in worship.
3. Preaching and praying about domestic violence as a justice issue and as a violation of the covenant of marriage builds a level of trust between the pastor and the membership of the church and gives members permission and comfort to share this issue with their pastor as it arises.
4. Currently a majority of churches, in our denomination, have male pastors as solo pastors or as heads of staff. Pastors of all congregations need to address the issue theologically as a violation, both against the covenant of marriage and the victim and other family members. Amongst members in our churches a high degree of trust and authority is placed in the pastor of the church and when the pastor addresses this issue from the pulpit, family violence is widely understood as an issue worthy of the faith community's full attention and focus.
5. It is not enough for a well-meaning pastor to launch into addressing domestic violence from the pulpit unless he or she engages in adequate educational training. Domestic violence has many levels to it, each which must be explored and understood including social, psychological, legal, and the theological dimensions of the issue. A well-informed pastor must know how the Bible and theology have been misused by pastors in

counseling and preaching, most dramatically to the detriment of the victim, but even for the perpetrator. They must know why couples counseling and anger management courses are not only inadequate but may actually have dangerous implications if used in addressing family violence with victims and perpetrators.

6. Victims and family members where domestic violence is present have significant needs for support, safety and wellbeing. The pastor must also recognize that the perpetrator needs a whole set of pastoral needs including accountability, restorative justice for the victim, and forgiveness and healing for himself as a perpetrator. In all probability, male ministers with a clear sense of the justice and reconciliation issues surrounding Domestic Violence are in a stronger position to effectively connect with male perpetrators.