

STUDY PAPER ON FAMILY VIOLENCE

**APPROVED BY THE 203RD GENERAL ASSEMBLY (1991)
FOR STUDY THROUGHOUT THE CHURCH
THE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH (U.S.A.)**

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September 1991

To Pastors of Churches and Clerks of Sessions of Vacant Pulpits, and
Stated Clerks and Executives of Presbyteries and Synods

Dear Colleagues:

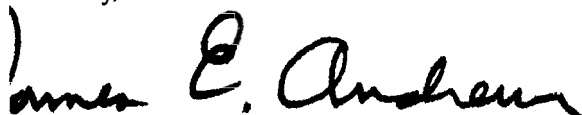
Concern about an epidemic of spouse, child, and elder abuse led the Committee of Women of Color and the Women's Ministry Unit to recommend to the 203rd General Assembly (1991) a paper on domestic violence for study throughout the church.

The assembly urged churches to study the paper on family violence and to establish programs that respond to domestic abuse in their communities. It also instructed me to print the domestic violence paper and to distribute a copy to each church.

It is hoped that, through various groups in the church, Presbyterians will decide to become more knowledgeable about domestic violence.

Information on ordering additional copies of this document may be found on the copyright page of this publication.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "James E. Andrews". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large initial "J" and "A".

James E. Andrews
Stated Clerk of the General Assembly

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RECOMMENDATIONS

The 203rd General Assembly (1991)

- 1. urges the churches to study the paper on domestic violence and establish programs to respond to domestic abuse in their communities; and**
- 2. authorizes the Stated Clerk to print the domestic violence paper and distribute it to each church.**

STUDY PAPER ON FAMILY VIOLENCE

PREFACE

“ . . . from prophet to priest, every one deals falsely. They have healed the wound of my people lightly, saying ‘Peace, peace,’ when there is no peace” (Jeremiah 6:13-14).

These words of the prophet Jeremiah describe the situation of many churches and their members suffering abuse by family members. The purpose of this paper is to stimulate churchwide awareness, discussion, and response to the presence of these abuses. This document addresses a particular form of violence experienced by members of the church: family violence.

Issues of violence against women and children historically have been treated as women’s issues. Domestic violence and sexual abuse have not been regarded for what they truly are—issues of concern to the entire church. These issues have not been included in the usual and customary activity of the church as requirements of theological education, scriptural reflection, liturgical practice, religious instruction, or social action. One of the results of the exclusion of these issues from the normal life of the church has been the failure of those in leadership to address them seriously and responsibly.

It is unfortunate that church practice, past and contemporary, mimics and reflects the attitudes and behavior of the wider society. Lip service has been paid to the presence of victims, survivors, and abusers in our midst. However, merely

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mentioning abusive behavior is insufficient. The call of a prophetic people is not only to denounce oppression, but also to announce liberation -providing a model that challenges the status quo. The church has behaved in such a way that the meaning of liberating grace has been limited for victims and abusers. The church can no longer rely on cliches and platitudes, hand-wringing and tongue-clucking in response to suffering.

If the prophetic voice is still heard in our time, then we call upon those who have ears to hear, those with eyes to see, and those who carry out the mission of Christ in the world to act with justice on behalf of those who are victims; to call to account those who are perpetrators of family violence; and to create a community where the wounds of the people are healed more than lightly.

THEOLOGICAL REFLECTION

"My God, my God, why have you deserted me? How far from saving me, the words I groan! Do not stand aside: trouble is near, I have no one to help me!" (Psalms 22:1; 11).

When I told our pastor about the children's fear, the verbal abuse, hospitalizations, and miscarriage caused by my husband's violence, he told me that I had married for better or for worse.

As a battered wife, I had become conditioned to a lack of compassion, companionship, and care. when I approached the pastor for assistance, I was at my wits end. I was convinced that my role as wife and mother was to keep peace in our home. I had prayed; and attempted to change my behavior in every way that I knew in order to get my husband to change. When I told our pastor about the children's fear, the verbal abuse, hospitalizations, and miscarriage caused by my husband's violence, he told me that I had married for better or for worse. He sent me home with

assurances that if I continued to be a faithful wife and mother, my prayers would be answered. —A Presbyterian woman.

With this brief comment of one of thousands of women with similar experiences, we are given a glimpse of the injury present within our churches today. Not only was this woman in an abusive marital relationship, but her pain was legitimated by her pastor's interpretation of the meaning of the marital covenant. Having turned to the one place where she had every reason to expect sanctuary, she was given responsibility for ending her husband's abusive behavior. Instead of receiving affirmation of her value and worth, she was given an additional burden.

Vindication and justicemaking are fundamental expectations of those who act in faith. The church is admonished not to turn away from those seeking justice when they have been harmed (Luke 18: 2-8). Doing the work of justice with those who have been abused requires more than platitudes and commandments. Hebrew tradition required that the community protect widows, orphans, and sojourners—those most vulnerable and with the least community resource at their disposal. Those most vulnerable to abuse and with least resource in our midst today—women, children, the elderly, those physically or developmentally disabled—are no less entitled to the protection of the community of believers. The church must be more than a place of rules and ritual. The church must be a place where burdens are lifted and practice is consistent with preaching (Matt. 23:2-4).

God continues to call us to faithfulness in this time and place. We are to offer a message of hope and vindication to those experiencing abuse. Our

Doing the work of justice with those who have been abused requires more than platitudes and commandments

task is to get a clear understanding of the good news: release from bondage; new sight; and freedom for the oppressed in the context of victims and perpetrators of abuse; and our responsibility toward them (Luke 4:18). We do not undertake this task alone. Relying on the power of the Holy Spirit, we can be assured of the grace, wisdom, and courage needed to take on the challenges before us.

THE SCOPE OF THE ISSUES

VIOLENCE IN OUR SOCIETY

In the United States, there is evidence of an increasing tolerance and glorification of interpersonal violence in many forms.

Some philosophers, historians, and other observers of human behavior assert that violence perpetrated by one human against another dates to prehistoric times. They point to biblical and other literary and anthropological evidence to support their claims; frequently citing wars between tribes and religious or racial and ethnic groups.

In the United States, there is evidence of an increasing tolerance and glorification of interpersonal violence in many forms. Some sociologists argue that the violent behavior exhibited by today's youth is merely a repetition of rites of passage and assertion of independence all youth experience. Additionally, they cite the extent to which violent themes dominate films, music lyrics, television programming, video games, comedy, and advertising—the material that makes up much of the environment of youth. While all of these influences are part of a young person's environment, the most critical dimension of that environment, what is experienced in the family, must not be overlooked.

FAMILY VIOLENCE

Statistics

In the United States, domestic violence is one of the most common experiences for adults and children of every race and class, regardless of their educational or religious background. Victims of domestic violence are those most vulnerable due to age, gender, economic dependence, physical or developmental abilities, or other life circumstance where others have power over them.

Every 60 seconds one case of physical spouse assault is reported in this country.¹ Although researchers and treatment professionals have varying conclusions about exact figures, at least one in three females² and one in eleven males³ are sexually abused before the age of eighteen. Ninety percent of all incidents of child sexual abuse are perpetrated by someone known and trusted by the child. These include family members, family friends, a neighbor, teacher, or pastor.⁴ Fourteen percent of married women report rape by their husbands.⁵

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Two thousand children in the United States will die this year of physical abuse or neglect.⁶ A million elderly people annually suffer some form of elder abuse.⁷ These figures alone do not tell us what is meant by the words family violence. It is important, therefore, that we have a shared understanding of the language we use.

What is family violence? Family violence may best be defined descriptively; that is, what people actually are experiencing. The adjective family distinguishes it from violence perpetrated by strangers or acquaintances in other contexts. Family violence occurs between family members,

those in most intimate relationship with one another.

Family Violence—Four Types of Behaviors⁸

Physical Violence

Acts of physical violence—also known as battering—may range from a slap or a push (that may result in injury requiring hospitalization); to the use of objects or weapons; to homicide and suicide.

Psychological Abuse

Psychological abuse refers not only to verbal arguments, but to a range of degrading, humiliating, and controlling behaviors. The abuse is intended to undermine the victim's sense of self-worth. It is carried out in a context of the use of violence or the threat of violence. Victims of psychological abuse may be compared to prisoners of war who never know when their captors will eventually kill them. Victims of abuse often report that psychological abuse was the most devastating dimension of the abuse pattern. Included in psychological abuse is neglect of a dependent child or adult—withholding or refusing medical attention or other basic needs.

Sexual Abuse

Sexual abuse often accompanies physical abuse against women, where blows are directed to the sexual parts of the body or beatings are accompanied by forced sexual intercourse—known as marital rape. Sexual abuse directed at children or teenagers by older family members is known as incestuous abuse. (The most commonly reported familial sexual assault is from father to daughter.) Sexual assaults also may be perpetrated against adults within the family.

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Destruction of Property and Pets

This is a form of abuse wherein the property or pets of the victim are destroyed. The destruction is not random, as in a "rampage"; the belongings or pets are specifically those of the persons being abused.

Typically, the most frequent victims of domestic violence are women, children, the elderly, persons with physical or developmental disabilities. The most frequent batterers are male. Whereas there are women who batter, the incidence of female to male violence is significantly less frequent, of shorter duration, and results in less serious injury. Physical abuse of children is perpetrated by older siblings and adults of either gender. However, "among reported cases of [sexual] abuse of children, 90 percent of offenders appear to be men. . . . When women are . . . involved in molestation, more often than not it is at the instigation and encouragement of men."⁹

Consequences of Abuse

The most immediate consequence of abuse is the distortion and destruction of the right relationship between partners, parents and children, and among other family members. Domestic violence has been cited as the most frequent cause of women using hospital emergency services. The Children's Defense Fund in 1987 estimated that a minimum of 1,200,000 children run away from home each year.¹⁰ Frequently they are escaping environments of abuse and neglect.

These observations are augmented by a growing body of medical, criminal, and psychological research, combined with evidence from personal disclosures informing us of the gravity of the situation we face. Our jails, substance abuse programs,

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mental health facilities, cemeteries, and streets are full of children and adults whose lives were destroyed by victimization. The fabric of the society is no stronger than the strands woven into it. Some of the effects of abuse in the absence of intervention or treatment include: physical injury, mental disorders, arrested development of children, substance abuse, and death. Without appropriate intervention and treatment, perpetrators continue to repeat their offenses. In the absence of support and counsel, victims often are ill-equipped to protect themselves or those in their care from being abused in the future.

Without appropriate intervention and treatment, perpetrators continue to repeat their offenses.

A significant concern for members of a faith community who are abused—whether as children or adults—is the damage to their understanding of God and their understanding of self-worth. Unless the church places itself in unequivocal solidarity with victims, consistently holds abusers accountable, and challenges social norms tolerating the privatization of violence in the home, it should be considered a silent accomplice in the harm done to those most vulnerable in its midst.

Since the intent of this paper is to provide a framework for discussing family violence in the context of the church community, it is necessarily limited. Indeed, several books have been written addressing each type of abusive behavior named here. Although the authors recognize that a number of factors and circumstances influence abusive behavior, this paper is not intended to address topics such as substance abuse, other “addictions,” pornography, or other dysfunctional behaviors. Each of these issues is deserving of investigation and the church’s specific attention. We encourage examination of these and other related

issues of concern for the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.).

SOCIAL AND RELIGIOUS TRADITIONS

No behavioral phenomenon exists in a vacuum. The tolerance of abusive behavior is not attributable solely to an increase in violence in various media. It would be overly simplistic, although perhaps more palatable, to start with the legacy of original sin or the universality of human imperfection. However, commitment to breaking silence requires an analysis of the social context that undergirds family violence.

Despite the efforts of individual men and women committed to personal and societal change, the majority of Western, postindustrial societies—including the United States—appears committed to conventional, doctrinal, judicial, and scriptural interpretations upholding male domination as a normative social value. Such societies bolster the exercise of patriarchal prerogative. This prerogative grants men, solely by virtue of gender, the right to control the lives, bodies, emotions, and actions of women and children. With such privilege in place, women and children are viewed as subordinate to men. In addition to the right to control, other gender-based prerogatives are reinforced. The most basic among these are license to punish others for perceived deficiencies and inadequacies, and unlimited access to another's body. The combination of these basic presumptions functions as a birthright, passed from one generation to the next. As a general rule, exercise of these prerogatives goes unchallenged.

The absence of challenge within the church as well as the wider community contributes to a

The absence of challenge within the church as well as the wider community contributes to a conspiracy of societal silence and denial regarding the prevalence of family violence.

conspiracy of societal silence and denial regarding the prevalence of family violence. Male domination of women, together with the collective refusal to respect the bodily integrity of children, provide implicit sanction of violations against individuals perceived as "permissible victims."

Interpretations of Scripture that equate maleness with the essence of God and countenance the silencing of women, serve to perpetuate a distorted understanding of gender relations. According to theologian Rosemary Radford Ruether:

Society persists in reinforcing an interpretation of "power over" as opposed to mutuality as the basis for the marital covenant.

The greater physical strength of men compared to women, and the physical training of males for aggression and the training of women in passivity, are the foundations of a system that treats all women as wives – as property and servants of men. Religion has too often justified this violence both legitimating the male right to beat their wife and directing women to accept it as a means of their redemption. A theology of victimization turns the crucifixion of Christ into a spirituality of sadism for men and masochism for women.

Society persists in reinforcing an interpretation of "power over" as opposed to mutuality as the basis for the marital covenant (Eph. 5:21 ff). It is in relatively recent history that women in the United States have been seen as autonomous agents to vote or establish credit apart from their husbands. Even though it is a violation of employment laws, prospective employers continue to ask women their marital status. The current or future marital status of men does not receive similar scrutiny. Pastors continue to counsel battered women to stay with abusive husbands; and judges dismiss charges, and issue court orders granting abusers "parental right" of access to children they have

abused. Such counsel and access have been known to result in victims' death.

Similarly, the social and religious requirement that children comply indiscriminately with the wishes of their parents and other adults, contributes to their being violated. Despite public claims that children are our nation's most important resource, they continue to be treated as if they are liars, manipulators, and incapable of describing what is real for them.

One of the strongest admonitions in Scripture is found when Jesus asserts that "it would be better to have a millstone hung about one's neck and be tossed into the sea, than to cause a little one to stumble" (Luke 17:2). Children continue to be treated as property. The parent who states, "she is my child; I'll do as I please," has reduced that child to the status of a possession.

Our tradition of upholding the sanctity of the home, and the sovereignty of the male parent within it, legitimated situations of abuse. Our traditional interpretations of sparing the rod (Prov. 29:15, 17) and the injunction to honor parents (Eph. 6:2-3) have not served either victims or abusers well. In biblical times, the rod was used to guide and protect from harm, not oppress. We seldom read the fourth verse of Ephesians 6 and discuss (a) that the passage is directed to adult children, and (b) the admonition to parents that they not provoke their children to anger. Certainly neglect, emotional abuse, battery, and sexual assault are provocations to anger.

The distortion of the meanings of suffering, forgiveness, and reconciliation in our congregations and courtrooms continues to blame victims

The distortion of the meanings of suffering, forgiveness, and reconciliation in our congregations and courtrooms continues to blame victims and fails to require genuine repentance—as opposed to remorse—from abusers.

and fails to require genuine repentance—as opposed to remorse—from abusers.¹³ In our desire to maintain the “appearance” of family, we are willing to sacrifice the safety of victims. When family homicides are reported by the media, the most frequent quotes attributed to neighbors and friends are comments such as, “they were such a nice family, so normal.”

We continue to value pretense over protection of the vulnerable; our personal comfort level over truth-telling. We prefer to think that somehow the statistics about abuse, its victims and perpetrators, excludes the people in our pulpits and pews.

THE TASK BEFORE US: THE ROLE OF THE CHURCH IN HEALING THE WOUNDS

If at least 33 percent of all girls and 15 percent of all boys are sexually abused in some way before the age of eighteen; and a woman is battered every eighteen seconds in this country; and 4 percent of the elderly population is being abused, then the number of victims, survivors, and perpetrators in our churches is staggering.¹⁴ What are the messages conveyed to them in sermons, pastoral counseling, liturgies, education, and youth programs? How do we support attitudes and behavior that contribute to abuse, or challenge them? What does it mean to be faithful to the building of the kingdom of God evidenced by justice and right relationship?

These are questions the church must address without equivocation in order to be responsible in its actions to keep faith with God in serving God’s people.

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PREVENTION, INTERVENTION, AND RESPONSE

Recommendations for action: The faith community contributes either to perpetuating abuse or working to eliminate it. In the aftermath of a disclosure of victimization to the community, a frequent response is to seek reconciliation among those involved. The community believes this is the way to demonstrate its compassion and care and follows this pattern regardless of the extent of its awareness and knowledge concerning the abuse. Unfortunately, the consequence of this course of action may be continued victimization rather than healing. At stake is not only the well-being of victims/survivors, but also the possibility of authentic repentance on the part of abusers. Caution is in order.

Too often in an attempt to reduce others' discomfort, frustration, and alienation, cheap grace and premature forgiveness are offered. There must be a willingness to live with painful new knowledge about someone who previously had suffered in silence and to confront frightening or disquieting information about someone previously trusted. Despite feelings of ambivalence, the priority of the church always must be to act in ways that promote safety for victims/survivors. The second task of intervention is to call abusers to accountability. The final goal, attempted only after the first two, is to assist in restoring relationships (where that is genuinely possible) and/or to assist in mourning losses. These are no simple tasks. Mistakes will be made, and justice will always be approximate. The recommendations that follow fall under the purview of various structures within

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the church. Each of us is challenged to pursue implementation in the places we find ourselves.

INVOLVEMENT

Congregational

Communities throughout the United States provide programs, agencies, and organizations serving persons affected by family violence. All congregations provide Christian education, adult education, and social concerns activities. In cooperation with community-based programs, information can be shared throughout the congregation in the following ways:

- invite speakers from local service agencies, such as rape crisis centers, domestic violence shelters, and children services, for group presentations and training;
- distribute brochures giving information about resources available in the community;
- include shelter and crisis phone numbers in bulletins;
- provide sermons and prayer services specifically addressing concerns of those in situations of abuse as part of the liturgical life of the congregation;
- collect and donate usable clothing, toys, and household goods to the local shelter or safe home program;
- observe domestic violence awareness month (October); sexual assault awareness month (May); and child abuse prevention month (April) with special liturgies and programs;
- incorporate sex abuse prevention training in child and teen education programs;
- volunteer with programs serving domestic violence or sexual abuse victims;

Communities throughout the United States provide programs, agencies, and organizations serving persons affected by family violence.

- create an atmosphere that supports those who break silence around these issues so that those who are suffering will know they are not alone;
- ask prospective candidates for pastoral or other church leadership positions about their knowledge, training, and experience specifically related to family violence.

Presbytery, Synod, and Assembly

The life of the faith community is guided, informed, and fashioned by its leadership. Leadership sets the tone, defines the standard, and provides policy and oversight of the denomination. Previous sections of this paper described the history and present state of family violence in our country. The following recommendations are intended to address ways that the institutional health of the denomination can benefit the entire church—particularly those involved in situations of abuse.

TRAINING AND EDUCATION OF CHURCH LEADERSHIP

1. All persons preparing for the ministry should receive training on issues of sexual assault and domestic violence. Currently, such training in seminaries and theological schools is either nonexistent, limited to an hour or two within pastoral care, or provided as a special interest of instructors. There is a need for cross-disciplinary study of the ways that the church either hinders or helps victims and abusers who are affected by family violence.
2. Those already involved in ministry should be provided with information on these issues

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through written materials, seminars, and workshops as part of their continuing education.

3. Seminary or continuing education preparation for teaching and pastoral counseling should include training regarding identification of symptoms of abuse and appropriate intervention in instances where abuse is reported or suspected.
4. Instruction for recognizing professional limitations and making appropriate referrals should be consistently included in training.

MINISTERIAL GUIDELINES

1. Attention to ministerial health should include such things as: self-care; stress management; attention to family relationships; reasonable workloads; and collegial consultation and supervision.
2. Regular pastoral review should be incorporated in a systematic fashion, so that problem areas or areas of need on the part of the clergy can be addressed.

Our call is to be the presence of Christ bringing good news to a weary and troubled world. Good-will and good intentions alone will not provide what is necessary to bring about change. We must be willing to risk—with moral courage and conviction—denouncing abuse of persons in all its forms, particularly those that violate our most sacred and intimate relationships. The church may be tempted to resist entering into areas where it has limited expertise. That may provide an excuse, at least for a time, not to proceed. But, we can no longer claim as the youthful Jeremiah, "Lord God, I do not know how to speak." Rather, we can pursue

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what is right equipped with this counsel: "What is good has been explained to you, . . . this is what Yahweh asks of you: only this, to act justly, to love tenderly, and to walk humbly with your God" (Micah 6:8).

NOTES

1. FBI, quoted in *Verified Domestic Violence Statistics*. Western Center on Domestic Violence, 1984.
2. Diana Russell, "The Incidence and Prevalence of Intrafamilial and Extrafamilial Sexual Abuse of Female Children." *Child Abuse and Neglect: The International Journal*. October, 1982.
3. David Finkelhor, *Sexually Victimized Children*. New York: Free Press, 1979.
4. Sexual Assault Center, Harborview Medical Center, Seattle, Washington.
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7. "Elder Abuse: An Examination of a Hidden Problem." Report of U.S. House of Representatives Select Committee on Aging, 1981.
8. *Family Violence: A Workshop Manual for Clergy and Other Service Providers*. Center for the Prevention of Sexual and Domestic Violence, Seattle, Washington.
9. David Finkelhor, *A Sourcebook on Child Sexual Abuse*. Beverly Hills, California: Sage Publications, 1988.
10. *A Children's Defense Budget: FY 1988. An Analysis of Our Nation's Investment in Children*. Children's Defense Fund, 1987.
11. The term permissible victims refers to those who may be harmed with little or no negative consequences for the abuser(s).
12. Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Women-Church Theology and Practice*. (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1985), 154.
13. Remorse is an expression of feelings of sorrow, regret, and contrition. Expressions of remorse may be a first step of repentance, but they are not synonymous with repentance. Repentance, derived from the word metanoia, means a change or turning away from previous behavior. It is, in fact, a process, not a single expression or act.
14. See footnotes 1-7 for sources of these statistics.

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CURRICULA AND STUDY GUIDES

- "Family Violence: A Religious Issue: A Study/Action Guide for Congregations." Office of Women, Justice for Women, General Assembly Mission Board, Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.).
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"Preventing Child Sexual Abuse, Ages 9-12." A curriculum for use in Christian Education. Kathryn Goering Reid with Marie M. Fortune, New York: United Church Press, 1989.

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1983 United Presbyterian Women (III. Female Sexual Slavery and Violence and IV. Equal Rights for Women, Reference X-126).

1988 Minutes of the Joint Report of the Council on Women and the Church and the Committee on Women's Concerns "Pornography: Far from the Song of Songs" (*Minutes*, 1988, Part I, pp. 676-85, 686).

Study/action guide listed under curricula and study guides.

ORGANIZATIONS

National Coalition Against Domestic Violence, P.O. Box 15127, Washington, DC 20003-0127, (202) 293-8860.

National Coalition Against Sexual Assault, 2428 Ontario Road N.W., Washington, DC 20009, (202) 483-7165.

National Council of Child Abuse and Neglect, 1155 Connecticut Ave. N.W., Suite 400, Washington, DC 20036, (202) 429-6695.

Center for the Prevention of Sexual and Domestic Violence, 1914 N. 34th St., #105, Seattle, WA 98103 (206) 634-1903. An education, training, consultation, and referral agency addressing religious issues related to sexual assault and domestic violence.

State coalitions of domestic violence and sexual assault programs provide listings and referrals for local victim services and batterer or sex offender treatment programs.

For a more extensive listing of books, articles, curricula, audiovisual, and organizational resources see "Family Violence, A Religious Issue: A Study/Action Guide for Congregations." Office for Women, Justice for Women, General Assembly Mission Board, Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). (Currently available from the Committee of Women of Color, Women's Ministry Unit, Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.).)