

AN APPROPRIATE CHURCH RESPONSE TO FAMILY VIOLENCE AND CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE

by

Karen & Ron Flowers

Directors, Department of Family

Ministries, General Conference

1997

How to Use This Resource: This collection of resources provides an orientation for denominational leaders, pastors and local church leaders to heighten awareness of the reality and experience of abuse and family violence and to outline the elements of an appropriate church response. It may also be useful in such settings as pastors' meetings, church staff retreats, youth camp staff meetings, school board meetings, meetings of the Family Ministries committee and other departmental councils. As church leaders become informed and involved these resources will provide an information base for breaking the silence in the congregation. Along with the text for the Presentation Module the following supporting materials are supplied:

Presentation Helps:

[Presentation Helps #1 *Maria's Story: A Case Study*](#)

[Presentation Helps #2 *A Survivor's Litany*](#)

Handouts:

[Handout #1 *Abuse and Family Violence: Toward Some Definitions*](#)

[Handout #2 *Abuse Indicators*](#)

[Handout #3 *A Leader's Response to Abuse and Family Violence: Worksheet*](#)

[Handout #4 *Dealing with Abuse and Domestic Violence: Do's and Don'ts for Church Leaders*](#)

Suggested Program:

Dramatic presentation

Presentation module

Small group activity

Litany

Dramatic Presentation:

See [Presentation Helps #1 *Maria's Story: A Case Study*](#)

This presentation will quickly help participants understand the nature of abusive behavior, the underlying messages which prepare a woman to accept abuse, and the way in which the circumstances of a battered woman's life limit her options. Hope is present also, as the kinds of releasing experiences and beliefs are presented which can make it possible for her to break out of her bondage and seek help.

As the introduction to the case study suggests, the individual playing the part of the abuse victim will need to be chosen carefully. Also, since the story is a composite of scenarios from many battered women, and since the dynamics appear to be similar universally, it is appropriate for the couple to carry names suitable to your locale.

PRESENTATION MODULE

Introduction

A top priority. At the 1995 General Conference Session in Utrecht, Holland, world president Elder Robert Folkenberg isolated abuse and family violence as one of six major topics of concern confronting the church. More than one-fourth of the official delegation to the General Conference Session underscored the concern of world church leaders by their participation in the scheduled breakout session convened to address the topic. There it was urged that our denominational pastors and church leaders receive information and education on the topic and that an appropriate church response be made a top priority. The 1997 Family Ministries Planbook, and this particular orientation seminar, are among the resources directed toward the fulfillment of this mandate.

Recent Activity Within Our Denomination

Abuse and Family Violence Taskforce. Early in 1995, and again in early 1996, the General Conference Department of Family Ministries convened an interdivision, interdepartmental Abuse and Family Violence Taskforce. The Taskforce brought together family professionals, with experience in dealing with both the abused and abusers in therapeutic and community service settings, and church administrative and departmental leaders. The taskforce has reviewed global population statistics on abuse and available Seventh-day Adventist data on the incidence and nature of family violence and child sexual abuse. Additional data on the topic throughout the Adventist world is being collected. The taskforce has reviewed published denominational materials, programs and services, prioritized issues, developed a strategy for confronting these issues with increased intentionality in our church.

Denominational statements. At the 1996 General Conference Annual Council, a statement on Family Violence was voted by the delegates (See Appendix A, 1997 Planbook *Making Home a Place of Peace and Healing*). A statement on Child Sexual Abuse has been drafted and will be brought for approval in 1997.

An orientation video for pastors and church leaders is in process and will be released during 1997. Print resources accompanying the video will be useful in contextualizing the church's response to local communities and cultures.

Annotated listing of books, videos, curricular resources. A number of books, videos and curricular resources from both a Christian and secular perspective have been annotated (See *Selected Resources on Abuse and Family Violence*, 1997 Planbook *Making Home a Place of Peace and Healing*). Local churches, districts of churches, as well as union and conference/mission departments are urged to review this annotated list and establish a working and/or lending library, making as many as possible of these resources available to members, pastors, lay leaders, administrators and departmental directors.

Together we can break the silence. Together we can offer support to families struggling beneath the cloak of secrecy and the burden of abuse and family violence. Together we can open the path toward peace and healing in Adventist homes.

Definitions

(Distribute and present the material from [Handout #1 Abuse and Family Violence: Toward Some Definitions.](#))

What the Statistics Show

Research toward providing reliable estimations of the incidence of abuse and family violence is relatively new. Only in the last 25 years have these concerns been broadly recognized. The only large scale studies available have been conducted in the United Kingdom, the United States and Papua New Guinea. Developing countries are only beginning to gather information systematically, with Nigeria, Columbia, Bangladesh, and Chile among the first to gather such information.

Current methods of estimating the extent of the problem rely mainly on reported incidents of abuse in records, for example, those kept by police, welfare agencies, hospitals and women's shelters. Data available through such records or through phone and field surveys reveal only very conservative estimates of the magnitude of the problem since victims are often very reluctant to report that they have been abused. Many do not report because of feelings of guilt and shame, fear of loss of the economic support of their husband, fear of damaging their husband's career, fear of police and/or legal intervention, and fear for their lives and safety of their children. This much is clear: we are confronted with an epidemic of abuse and family violence which is global in its proportions. The limitations of the data available cannot be construed as hope that the plague is confined.

(To help your group appreciate the magnitude of the global statistics, invite them to participate in a statistical demonstration. Number them in groups of ten, with each person in each group assigned a number from 1 to 10. Call upon the various numbers to stand to represent the percentage of the population reporting abuse and violence experienced in the categories that follow.)

Murder: *(Ask persons with numbers 1-5 to stand.)* You represent the 1:2 women (50%) murdered between 1983 and 1985 in Bangladesh who were victims of domestic violence. In Canada, it is 3:5. In the U.S., 1:3. In England and Wales, 1:4. In Michigan, a woman is killed every five days the year around in an incidence of domestic violence.

Battery: *(Ask persons with numbers 1-7 to stand.)* You represent the 67% of a comprehensive random sample of wives in Papua New Guinea who, in 1986, suffered the nightmare of marital violence. Data for 1992 in the United States indicate that episodes of violence will occur at least once in two-thirds of all marriages. During a six-month period following an incident of domestic violence, 1:3 of the women will be victimized again. If a woman stays with her abusive husband, she will be at 75% higher risk of being killed by her husband than non-battered wives. In a summary of Texas shelter research, one-half of the women seeking shelter services were reported to have experienced abuse on a weekly basis. Studies emerging from Australia, Kuwait, Kenya, Thailand, Austria and Nigeria place family violence at significant levels.

Assault: *(Ask persons with numbers 1-9 to stand.)* In Columbia, 94% of all assault victims are women. (This statistic holds across the international research available.) You represent these women as they stagger, bruised and bleeding, often alone, into the hospital emergency rooms of Bogota. Forty percent of you are pregnant. Many for the first time. You are at twice the risk for miscarriage as other pregnant women.

Rape: *(Ask persons with numbers 1-5 to stand.)* Among women 12 years and older, 133,000 will be victims of rape or attempted rape in a year's time in the United States alone. You represent the 55% of these victims whose capacity to trust is violated as deeply as your bodies because you know your rapists. In one of the most devastating experiences imaginable, 1:8 married women will be coercively raped by their husbands.

Child abuse: *(Ask persons with numbers 1-3 to stand.)* You represent the 1:3 girls who will be sexually abused before you reach the age of 18. One half of these girls will have to face throughout their lifetimes the horrible realization that they have lived with daddies and grandpas

and brothers and uncles who are tragically different from other men. Not all daddies and grandpas and brothers and uncles abuse girls in the name of "love," in ways which make love feel so wrong, as their men have done. They will have to face that they have been robbed of their innocence. Many have been robbed of their childhoods.

The Statistical Abstract of the United States reports that in 1993 there were 838,232 cases of neglect, 204,404 cases of physical abuse, 129,404 cases of sexual abuse, and 49,123 cases of emotional abuse. In one-half of these cases, the abuse was perpetrated against female children, with the greatest incidence among children ages 3-5. These are *substantiated* cases. Heaven alone has the records on the total number of cases occurring in families where the code of silence remains unbroken.

Among Seventh-day Adventists. (*Ask persons with numbers 1-6 to stand.*) In a study conducted in one union in North America, with over 500 randomly selected Adventist church members responding, 56% said that physical abuse had been directed toward them or their siblings in the homes in which they grew up. Significant levels of physical, emotional and sexual abuse were reported by the nearly 8,000 randomly selected respondents to the Adventist Family Study initiated by the General Conference Department of Family Ministries in 1994. A range of 8-18% of female respondents reported being sexually abused. (The range indicates the lowest and highest percentages reported in the world divisions for which data is currently available.) The percentages of women reporting physical (15-43%) and emotional abuse (27-69%) were considerably higher than those reporting sexual abuse. On average, women reported greater levels of abuse than men. A range of 4-12% of males reported sexual abuse, 15-55 % physical abuse, and 6-37% emotional abuse. As with women, reports of sexual abuse among men were lower than other forms of abuse.

A Profile of Abuse Victims and Their Abusers

It is not likely that a victim of abuse and/or family violence will announce that they are being battered or sexually exploited. If they reveal anything at all about their circumstances, they often speak in terms that are general or vague. But professionals mark a number of indicators that characterize families in which abuse may be occurring. The presence of these indicators should put pastors and church leaders on alert that a spouse, child, or family may be at risk. It is true that abuse and violence are blind to age, social status, color, culture and creed. There is no typical victim, no typical perpetrator, except insofar as the victim is overwhelmingly female and the perpetrator male. It is also true that the presence of any one of these general indicators does not necessarily mean that abuse or violence is present. But as the number of these observable indicators increases, concern for their safety and well-being should increase on the part of church leaders.

(*Distribute and present the material on [Handout #2 Abuse Indicators](#).*)

When you suspect abuse, create safe opportunities for the individual to share her story with you. Remember that in some abusive situations, violence occurs in a three-phase cycle. Tension builds (stage 1), there is an abusive episode (stage 2), followed by what appears to be remorse on the part of the abuser (stage 3), gestures of "love" and promises that it will never happen again. What is likely happening, however, is that the abuser has merely changed tactics and seeks to gain control in another way. However, because many victims want so badly to believe that these actions represent a genuine intention to change on the part of the abuser, attempts to intervene during this part of the cycle (stage 3) are usually ineffective. The best time to open the opportunity for her to talk with you is when she appears frightened, angry, depressed, or reaching out for help. Ask her questions such as, "Are you in danger now?" "What does your husband do when he gets angry?" "Are you worried about the safety of yourself and your children?" "What options do you see yourself as having?"

Wounded individuals and families victimized by abuse and family violence deserve a ready and

compassionate response from the church. To remain indifferent and unresponsive is to condone, perpetuate, and potentially extend such behavior. To respond with caring concern, understanding, and practical help is the church's moral responsibility and tangible evidence of the presence of Christ in the midst of the community of faith.

An Appropriate Church Response

In dealing with abuse and family violence, the full range of services provided through preventive education, support systems such as the church, and professional mental health and social services should be utilized. The church has a significant part to play in breaking the silence on abuse and family violence. Pastors and their spouses as well as respected church leaders are powerful voices both within the congregation and in the surrounding community, holding high God's ideal for marital and parent-child relationships. At the same time, they may use their voices to keep the church and community in firm touch with the hard realities of a world of sin and to establish a climate in which the truth can be confronted and resources marshaled to respond to the needs of families in which abuse and family violence are occurring. Most pastors do not have adequate training or the necessary licensure to treat abuse victims or their abusers. However, they can take their appropriate place in a supportive role and as a bridge to the full network of professional and community resources available.

The New Testament metaphor for church as the "household of faith" creates a vision of community, of family, where members turn from the total pursuit of personal agendas to become involved in one another's lives. To be involved means:

- To "care-front" one another when disconcerting indicators call for compassionate inquiry.
- To endeavor to protect the vulnerable and to stop abuse.
- To hold abusers firmly responsible for their behavior.
- To become actively aware of professional family resources in the church and the community.
- To help families find and access these resources.
- To provide support and encouragement for all family members as they process their pain with professionals trained to help them.
- To respond to the spiritual questions which arise out of abusive and violent experiences.
- To minister to families as they move toward reconciliation when true repentance on the part of the abuser—which always includes acceptance of responsibility for the abusive behavior, restitution in every way possible for the harm done, and evidence of changed attitudes and behavior—opens the way for forgiveness and new beginnings.
- To assist families in grieving the loss of significant relationships severed by continuing abuse and violence.

Practical Suggestions for a Helpful Response

(Distribute [Handout #3 A Leader's Response to Abuse and Family Violence](#). This is a worksheet with the following main points and opportunity for participants to make their own notes.)

1. Speak out about abuse and family violence in your church and community.

Communities of faith must move beyond denial and face the hard realities of abuse and family violence in their midst and in the communities around them. For too long abuse victims and survivors have suffered in silent fear and dread, with even the closest of friends, work associates, fellow church members, and family unaware of their painful secret. They need pastors and church leaders who will declare that abuse and violence are wrong and who are prepared to follow through on their convictions.

Disseminate information. Your church can play an important role in breaking the silence on these issues by disseminating the best information available, from the pulpit, through your church newsletter, your Sabbath School classes, and your leadership committees. Premarital guidance

sessions, marriage enrichment retreats and parent education classes all provide opportunities to share information that will be helpful in prevention and intervention. When you speak out, chances are you will not only be making the most of your best opportunities to disseminate good information. You will also be creating an atmosphere in which victims and survivors can safely tell their stories and find help.

Your church and community needs:

- Your ringing affirmation of the dignity and worth of every human being made in God's image and redeemed by the blood of Christ;
- Your voice lifted with those of others to decry all forms of physical, sexual and emotional abuse and violence because love and mutuality, not force and the abuse of power, are to characterize Christian relationships;
- Your acknowledgment of the global extent of this problem and the serious, long-term effects of abuse and family violence upon the lives of all involved;
- An indication of your willingness to be actively involved in addressing these problems.

Speaking out is the first step in both prevention and intervention.

2. Prepare yourself to make appropriate referrals.

Make it your responsibility to learn all that you can about the resources available to victims of abuse and family violence within your congregation and in the community. The most successful response to abuse and family violence utilizes the full range of professional and support services available. The goal is to bring abuse and family violence to the attention of those who can help and to put the family members in touch with the professional resources necessary to bring about change. Individual and group therapy combined over a substantial period of time has proven most effective. However, a network of friends in the church who can be available to offer practical support is also needed. Without this network, many victims and perpetrators will be unable to benefit from the help available.

Become informed about available services. Acquaint yourself personally with the personnel and services of local shelters for battered women and children, child abuse prevention organizations, rape crisis centers, support groups and the agency to whom reports of suspected child abuse are to be made. Discover in advance how you can expect them to respond to your call when a woman seeks your help and you are needing to make a referral.

Introduce yourself and become acquainted with a network of Christian counselors with expertise in the fields of abuse in order to establish a ready list to whom you can refer. Know the services available through local law enforcement, for legal counsel, and where emergency babysitting services, medical care, food, clothing and temporary financial support can be found. Keep the names and telephone numbers of contact persons close at hand, as well as the numbers for local crisis hotlines. To become more proficient with abuse issues, you may wish to train as a volunteer and offer your services to one of these community organizations.

3. Recognize that your primary role is to listen and support those who have the courage to tell someone about the presence of abuse and violence in their family.

Take any report of abusive behavior seriously. Most battered women will minimize the abuse; few will exaggerate. Children, in most cases, simply do not have the experience or vocabulary to lie. Presume she is telling you only a small part of her story. Her worst fear is that no one will believe her. Affirm her for her courage. Likely she is very embarrassed and even now wondering if she is doing the right thing. Listen with compassion and empathy. Do not assign blame or interrogate her with questions like, "What did you do to make him angry?" Do not suggest that she go home and try harder to please him or imply that she has it in her power to stop the abuse.

Abuse is a choice made to control another person. Affirm that abuse is learned behavior. It is

about the desire of one person to exercise power and control over another. It cannot be excused by alcoholism, stress, the need to fulfill sexual desires, or any behavior of the victim. In many abusive situations, alcoholism, stress, or poor relational skills are also present. However, it has been shown that many who are alcoholics, who are in stressful situations, or who possess poor relational skills do not abuse their wives and children. Abuse is a choice made by the abuser. Victims do not deserve abusive behavior nor do they cause the abuser to abuse. What is happening to them is not their fault. No change in their behavior will bring an end to the abuse. Professional treatment can bring about a change in the abuser's behavior, but only if the abuser can be brought to the place where he takes responsibility for his abusive behavior and seeks help to change.

Help the abuse sufferer discover options. Do not minimize her fears for her life, whether she chooses to stay or to leave. Ask about her options for a safe place in which she herself and her children can take refuge when they are in immediate danger. You may need to help her find options—the home of a friend or relative, a shelter, a motel, or with someone in the church who is willing to provide safe haven. If the woman is in need of immediate medical attention, it can be very helpful for another woman whom she trusts to accompany her. Point out to her the importance of telling a physician the details about the origin of her injuries so that this information can accurately be included in her medical records.

Help her to explore the alternatives open to her. Her ability to perceive her alternatives or to evaluate them may be impaired by the circumstances. Offer assurance that the church will not abandon her or her family as they work through the problem one step at a time, no matter what lies ahead. Provide practical, short-term assistance as needed, but guard against making her dependent on others for the long run. Dependence breeds low self-esteem.

Support the victims choices. Allow her to make her own choices in her own time. It is not appropriate for you to tell her what to do. Your task is to support her decisions, even if you do not agree with the course of action she has chosen. You may, of course, share your concerns for her safety should she decide to stay in the relationship. It is never appropriate for you to urge her to stay in a destructive relationship in which the abuser refuses to take responsibility for his behavior and to seek professional help to change. A victim is not responsible for preserving the marriage, keeping the family together, or the salvation of her husband. The marriage covenant is built upon mutuality, love and trust. When these are violated, covenant has been broken.

You have ministered well when you have helped the victim to discover and maximize her own resources. Your task is to open the way for her to access as many professional resources as you can and to offer your's and the congregation's practical support as she utilizes these resources to benefit herself and her family.

Respect privacy. Be sensitive to the family's need for privacy and confidentiality. The congregation can be supportive without the family feeling as though they have become spectacles whom everyone is gossiping about. Reassure victims that you will not discuss their situation with anyone without permission.

A sequence to remember:

First, protect the victim and her children.

Second, support the family in identifying and utilizing professional resources to get help.

Third, help her deal with her spiritual questions.

Fourth, help her evaluate the relationship to determine if reconciliation is possible or if the relationship is too destructive for reconciliation. Offer her help with the reconciliation process and/or help to grieve the loss of a significant relationship.

In the best of circumstances, the wounds of abuse and family violence run deep. Scars inevitably remain. Only the senile forget. But with professional counseling the intense pain can be diminished and abusive experiences need no longer be incapacitating when the memory of the

abuse recurs throughout one's lifetime. God provides His own balm, the healing balm of forgiveness, which, in response to true repentance, can open the way for reconciliation and new beginnings.

The meaning of genuine repentance. Only when the perpetrator takes full responsibility for his action, makes restitution for harm done in every way possible, undergoes treatment and gives evidence of a radical change in behavior, can repentance be considered genuine. Do not be easily taken in by an abuser's claim to a religious conversion or reconversion without the earmarks noted above. Apart from true repentance and professional treatment, the abuse will almost certainly begin again if the family is reunited.

Forgiveness is a process. Forgiveness is often misunderstood. It is a process which takes a person(s) from an experience of deep pain to eventual healing. It is not a process which should be hurried. Reconciliation may take a very long time if it is possible at all. There is an aspect of forgiveness which can bring peace to a victim even when the abuser does not respond with repentance, restitution in every way possible, and changed behavior. But in this case, forgiveness is a choice which frees the victim from bitterness and a desire for revenge. When restoration in the relationship is not possible, it is helpful for the pastor to assist family members in grieving the loss of an important relationship.

4. Safeguard the children.

When a child makes a report, remember most children do not have the vocabulary or the experience to make up a convincing story. When, as is often the case, the abuser is a family member, friend, or someone else the child should have been able to trust and to count on to love and care for him or her, the abuse is particularly devastating. It is best for a pastor to simply listen and accept the child's account and feelings and to provide caring support. It is appropriate to ask questions like, "Is there anything more that you need to tell me?" or "What exactly did your uncle do?" If the child needs to be questioned further about details, it is best for these questions to be asked by professionals who have been trained in this area.

Report abuse to authorities. When you suspect a child is being victimized, it is morally responsible to make a report to appropriate authorities in order to protect them from further harm. In many places, making a report is also a pastor's legal responsibility. It is your responsibility to know the laws in your jurisdiction. Remember that often the involvement of the authorities is the most powerful motivator for an abuser to seek the professional treatment necessary to end the abuse. Where there are no civil authorities who will ensure the protection of children, it is incumbent upon Christians to do whatever they can to protect them. Children need a great deal of care and support when their families are in the midst of the turmoil brought on by abuse. They need reassurance that no matter what has happened, it is not their fault. While treatment toward healing from the trauma of abuse should be left to a professional counselor, the child needs his or her pastor and friends from the church to stay close and provide a safe, caring circle when everything else when the child's world seems to be falling apart.

5. Hold the abuser firmly accountable for his actions.

Many abusers will vehemently deny their abusive actions or minimize their severity or incidence. You will need to be caring but firm in your statements that the abusive behavior must cease immediately. For your own safety, do not confront the abuser alone. Do not suggest marital or couple counseling. Couple counseling is not effective at this point because the victim will not be free to talk without putting herself and her children at further risk. The first goal is not to save the marriage but to stop the abuse.

Treatment for abuse is complex. The abuse perpetrator should be placed in the care of professionals with expertise in this area as soon as possible. Without such professional help, the abusive behavior will almost surely continue. Without such help the abuser will be unable to see

the abusive nature of his behavior or identify the patterns of control and the abuse of power in his relationships. It should be made clear that any hope for restoration of his family relationships rests on his active participation in treatment and a radical change in his behavior.

6. Address the spiritual dimension.

Victims of abuse and violence in the church often struggle with deep spiritual questions. Where was God when I was being abused? If He is all powerful, why doesn't He stop my abuser? Is God punishing me for something I have done? Does He think I need to learn a lesson? I must be bad, else God would have protected me. Many feel God-abandoned and wrongly blame themselves and worry about whether God can ever forgive them.

At this time they need a faith community who accepts them, questions and all, recognizing that God will make Himself known to them as they are able to come to some understanding about the inevitability of suffering as part of life in a fallen world. They will come to see that you can't save anyone by letting them hurt you. With the passing of time they will become more open to your clarification about God's design for mutual submission in marriage, Christ's teachings about power and authority, and the difference between discipline and punishment.

They may need help to identify the earmarks of true repentance which always includes taking responsibility for wrongs committed, a change in behavior, and restitution wherever possible for harm done. They may need help to distinguish between the forgiveness which may someday free them from bitterness and a desire to hurt as they have been hurt even if there is no repentance on the part of the abuser, and the forgiveness that may open the way for the restoration of a relationship when true repentance and treatment which brings about changed behavior makes reconciliation possible. But for now, do not be hasty to correct theology or to offer directives or solutions. Leave room for God to do His work.

(Allow time for discussion in small groups regarding the orientation material that has been presented. Distribution of the [Handout # 4 Dealing with Abuse and Domestic Violence: Do's and Don'ts for Church Leaders](#) may add to the discussion. Encourage participants to focus on plans for implementation of these principles and concepts in their local area and in the arenas over which they have responsibility and influence.)

(Close with [A Survivor's Litany, Presentation Helps # 2.](#))

References

Bussert, J. M. K. (1986). *Battered women: From a theology of suffering to an ethic of empowerment*. New York: Lutheran Church in America.

Epp-Tiessen, E. (Ed.). *Expanding the circle of caring: Ministering to the family members of survivors and perpetrators of sexual abuse*. Akron, PA: Mennonite Central Committee U.S. Women's Concerns.

Fortune, M. M. (1987). *Keeping the faith: Questions and answers for the abused woman*. Harper & Row, Publishers, San Francisco.

Fortune, M. M. (1991). *Violence in the family: A workshop curriculum for clergy and other helpers*. Cleveland, OH: The Pilgrim Press.

Pope-Lance, D. J., & Engelsman, J. C. (1990). *A guide for clergy on the problems of domestic violence*. New Jersey Dept. of Community Affairs, Division on Women, Office on the Prevention of Violence Against Women, William Ashby Community Affairs Building, 101 South Broad Street—CN 801, Trenton, NJ 08625-0801.

Violence against women in the family. (1989). New York: United Nations.