

H. HOW CHURCHES CAN ADDRESS DOMESTIC ABUSE?

1. The role of the church

The culture of the local church is vitally important. A church life, which has an openness, where processes are transparent, and people feel they can be honest with each other, will allow an abused person or an abuser to talk about what is happening.

This involves providing resources for individuals and church communities so that they can respond appropriately and helpfully to disclosures of domestic abuse, recognising that abused women and men find it difficult to tell their story and may approach a friend in the congregation rather than a minister or pastoral worker.

Professional expertise is essential for more specialist work, but it is essential that tackling domestic abuse is not side-lined but is made the responsibility of the whole church community. Training in how to respond is also essential – if someone is not believed, or is not listened to appropriately, or if good information and support is not given, their long-term progress can be severely impaired.

The role of the church is to walk alongside the survivor on the journey back to wholeness. This may be done in partnership with specialist help from other agencies. Churches can offer real friendship at times of isolation and low self-esteem, offering encouragement and hope so that the individual can start to feel safe.

Raising awareness through teaching and worship

- a) Worship leaders can speak out against domestic abuse in preaching, teaching and prayers.
- b) Greater attention can be given to annual Abuse Awareness Day's both in the Church and national calendars. Churches can also highlight the General Conference's 'End it Now' initiative - enditnow.org
- c) Ministers, deacons and church leaders should be offered resources so that they can give clear statements that domestic abuse is wrong and tackle the myths that perpetuate disregard of abuse.
- d) Gender inequality must continually be challenged in all aspects of the life of the Church. Opportunity to discuss these issues within the church community should be offered in local churches.
- e) Language should reflect our beliefs about equality and dignity, and not increasingly marginalise those who may already feel of little value.
- f) Thought needs to be given to the way we use the Bible, and how theological emphases can be affirming or damaging to those caught up in abusive situations.
- g) Departments can work collaboratively to combat domestic abuse.
- h) Men's Ministries and men's groups can take a proactive role in addressing domestic abuse. Men are generally best placed to influence the thinking of other men regarding abuse against women.
- i) Up to date information on domestic abuse should be provided on the church's website.
- j) Every church should make church members aware of who to approach when they are ready to disclose domestic abuse. Each church is responsible for appointing properly trained individuals.

Working with children and young people

- a) There is an increasing awareness of Safeguarding throughout the Church in relation to children, young people and adults at risk. An addition to existing policies is recommended, providing clear information

on what to do if a child or young person discloses information about domestic abuse. This should include recognising the need to ask someone competent for advice, and who to approach.

- b) Workers with young people, Junior Sabbath School teachers, Pathfinder leaders and leaders of weekday clubs for children and young people should be given some training on domestic abuse, alongside leaders ministering to the adult congregation.
- c) Leaders should aim to affirm and model good, positive relationships in their work with young people.
- d) Awareness of the local schools' Personal, Health and Social Education (PHSE) programme can be used to open discussion about respect in relationships.
- e) Youth leaders can be encouraged to invite guest speakers to stimulate discussion, on the theme of domestic abuse and dating violence.
- f) Youth programming should be proactive in addressing and challenging popular culture that seeks to subjugate and denigrate women through film, music, pornography, print media and any other form of expression.
- g) The highest rate of divorce is among those who marry as teenagers. A rigorous process of pre-engagement and pre-marital preparation will help young people to identify and practice healthy relational principles.

NB - Disclosures of domestic abuse by children and young people must be taken seriously. The designated Safeguarding should always be contacted for advice.

Sharing information about local agencies

Local churches are encouraged to display posters and information from the local support agencies - Domestic Violence Forum, Women's Aid, Refuge, Victim Support, Respect, National DV Helpline – and to make the phone number of the local women's refuge available in the church and hall. See the Resources and References section of these procedures, for contact information. Due to the potential dangers of reprisals from victims accessing information about domestic abuse, resources should also be made available in locations that are inaccessible to perpetrators i.e. leaflets in toilets.

Information on domestic abuse displayed prominently can help to make it clear that the church is safe for victims to talk and is a place where perpetrators will be challenged.

Training people at all levels of the Church

Training and awareness-raising will need to include those preparing for pastoral ministry, in-service training, and training in local churches. Basic awareness of the extent and effects of domestic abuse on individuals, families and society should be an essential part of core training for all pastoral carers. Basic listening skills, and understanding when more help is needed, must be included in the training for pastoral carers. Training will assist individuals and churches to reflect on how domestic abuse affects everyone caught up in it, and how best they might support someone within their church community.

Training should stress the importance of collaborative working with other agencies. This can include both the sharing of good practice and benefitting from specialist expertise. Agencies such as Women's Aid, or the local Safeguarding Board may offer training modules at different levels for other statutory and voluntary bodies. They are usually very willing to work with churches to provide training or information. Collaborative working has a strategic place in enabling the church to play a positive role in the community.

In addition to face-to-face training, accredited online training options provide additional opportunities to equip church leaders with the knowledge and skills to address matters of domestic abuse. (See [Appendices](#), p22 for a list of organizations who provide training)

In the case of domestic abuse, the adage applies, that 'prevention is better than cure'. Because domestic abuse is such a pervasive evil within the church, combatting this scourge must be a collaborative initiative among the departments and institutions of the church, including family, schools, and seminaries.

Please note: Specialist training is required for those addressing abuse and abusive behaviours with victims, survivors, children and perpetrators.