

A CARING PASTORAL RESPONSE

Scripture provides a rich tapestry of support for a caring pastoral response to child abuse and neglect and family violence. The high value which God places on children (Ps. 127:3-5; Mark 10:13-16) and His concern for them in their innocence and vulnerability (Matt. 18:2-5; Eph. 6:4) under gird Jesus' strong language for those who would abandon responsibility to protect and nurture them (1 Tim. 5:8). His strong language is even more poignant for anyone who would exploit a child through a relationship upon which the child should be able to depend for love and trustworthiness (Matt. 18:5-6).

God's abhorrence of violence and oppression is one of Scripture's great themes (Ps. 11:5; Prov. 3:31-32; Is. 10:1-4; Mal. 2:16b). Violence and oppression are the antithesis of God's original design for human relationships (Prov. 10:6; Ez. 18:5, 7; 45:9; Rom. 8:5-8; 12:1-2, 10, 18; Eph. 5:29-31; 5:11-13, 19-21; Phil. 2:4-8) and form the backdrop against which the Messiah works His mighty restoration of all that has been lost through sin (Is. 16:4-5; 32:16-18; 42:1-4—compare Matt. 12:18-20; Is. 54:10-14; 60:17c-18, 20; 61:1-3—compare Luke 4:17-21; Is. 65:17-19—compare Rev. 21:1-4; John 16:33). God declares Himself a lover of justice (Is. 28:6; 30:18; 33:5; 61:8), and the champion of the oppressed, the innocent, the weak and vulnerable (Deut. 10:17-18; 2 Sam. 22:2-3; Ps. 9:9; 103:6; Prov. 5:21-23; Is. 11:4; 25:4; 51:12, 22). He feels their distress and hears their cries (2 Sam. 22:5-20; Ps. 18:6; 22:24; Is. 40:28-30; 41:17; 43:2; 51:3; 63:7-9; 66:12-13). God is deeply saddened when no one rises to their defense (Eccl. 4:1, 10-12; Is. 59:4, 6-8, 16; 63:5). We are called to be God's emissaries and to extend the ministry of Christ in the world through a caring pastoral ministry to victims of abuse and violence (Prov. 3:27; Is. 1:16-17; 16:3c-4; 58:6; Jer. 22:3; Matt. 25:34-40; John 20:21; James 1:27).

Pastoral care is perhaps the most important component which pastors and church leaders bring to the network of ministries and services needed by individuals and families suffering abuse and family violence.

In responding to a victim or family member who turns to you for help, remember this sequence:

1. Take all reports of abuse and violence seriously.
2. Make the safety of the victim(s) your first priority.
3. Support the family in identifying and using professional resources.
4. Respond to spiritual questions.

As you minister to abused persons through all of these steps, pastoral care is your most important responsibility. In the network of professionals and helpers needed to respond effectively to this crisis no one besides you has pastoral care as their primary responsibility.

BASIC GUIDELINES FOR PASTORAL CARE OF ABUSED ADULTS

1. Make safety your first priority

- Do not minimize the seriousness of the situation.
- Do not talk about the abuse with a victim when the abuser is in close proximity. Change the subject immediately if the abuser approaches.
- Never confront an abusive person alone. You may be putting yourself in serious danger.
- Never bring a couple together to try and settle their differences if there is *current* abuse and violence in the relationship. The threat of further abuse will make it all but impossible for the victim to speak frankly. Experience has also shown that, in cases of

abuse and violence, couple counseling increases the safety risk exponentially. Talking with the couple together will be safe only after the abuse has been stopped and giant strides have been made toward appropriate changes in attitudes and behavior.

- Be specific with questions which will help you determine the victim(s) immediate level of safety. Since she may still be struggling with confusion and denial, merely asking her if she is safe may not be sufficient. Ask questions like: What does he do when he gets angry? Are you presently in danger? What is the extent of your injuries? What options do you have for a safe place to go when you are in immediate danger? Do you have the resources for getting to a safe place if necessary?
- If she is in a dangerous situation, encourage her to find a safe place away from the abuser. Help her explore her options and come to a decision. If she decides to remain at home, encourage her to develop a safety plan for herself and her dependents in the event of further abuse. An example of a safety plan is found in Chapter 9 of this Quick Reference Guide.

2. Be an active listener

- Repeat back the information she has given you in an empathetic and caring manner to make sure you have understood and to indicate that you accept her feelings.
- Do not stand in judgment of her past or her future decisions. You are not walking in her shoes.

3. Acknowledge her pain and fears.

- Let her know that you care and can feel her pain.
- In time, as she moves toward healing the hurt within, empathize with her changing feelings and move forward with her.

4. Assure her that she is not alone in her suffering.

Many Adventist women know her pain firsthand.

5. Offer comfort without physical touching or getting too close.

Victims of abuse may be further traumatized by such gestures because of their past experiences. It is critical that you respond to her needs in ways which confirm that you are someone she can trust who will not abuse her further in any way.

6. Determine whether she needs medical attention.

- Point out to her the importance of telling a physician the details about the origin of her injuries so that this information can be accurately included in her medical records.
- Ask if it would be helpful for you to arrange for another woman whom she trusts to accompany her to the physician.

7. Be aware of the cycle of violence.

In some abusive situations, violence occurs in a three-phase cycle.

Stage 1: Tension builds.

Stage 2: An abusive episode occurs.

Stage 3: Apparent remorse on the part of the abuser is evidenced, and often accompanied by gestures of “love” and promises that the abuse will never happen again. While in some cases the abuser may genuinely want to change his behavior, the kindnesses shown at this stage more often indicate a change of tactics in which the abuser seeks to gain control through new methods.

- Anticipate resistance to intervention. During Stage 3 abuse victims will want so badly to believe that the abuse has stopped and will not occur again that it will be difficult to intervene.



- If you suspect abuse or are concerned for a victim's safety, watch for an opportunity to speak to her about your concerns during a period when she appears frightened, angry, depressed, or to be reaching out for help, i.e. during Stages 1 or 2.

8. Resist telling her what to do

You may be asking her to put her life and the lives of other dependent family members at risk. She needs your help to explore the alternatives open to her and freedom to make the best decisions she can with your support. However, it is always appropriate for you to express concern for her safety. Above all, make certain that your counsel does not put her at further risk.

- Do not imply that she must be doing something to cause the abuse, and thereby indicate that it is within her power to stop it.
- Do not send her back home to try harder to please her husband.
- Do not suggest that Scripture's counsel to wives to submit to their husbands includes accepting abuse.
- Do not make her feel responsible to keep the family together at all costs.
- Do not confront the abuser without the expressed permission of the battered woman.

9. Assure her that the church will not abandon her or her family

- Let her know that the family can count on your support no matter what lies ahead as they work through the problem one step at a time.
- Offer practical, short-term assistance as needed, but guard against making her dependent on others long term. Dependence breeds low self-esteem.

10. Acknowledge your limitations and prepare yourself in advance to make appropriate referrals

The best results in dealing with abuse and family violence have consistently come from utilizing as broad a network of professional services and support systems as is available to address the needs of the persons involved. Particularly is this the case if you are not a licensed counselor trained to deal with issues of abuse and domestic violence.

- Offer to help the victim and the abuser find and utilize the network of professional resources available in your community.
- Speak personally with personnel at community agencies which offer services to individuals and families experiencing abuse and violence. Become acquainted with the services provided and procedures for utilizing their resources.
- Introduce yourself to counselors in your area to whom you may wish to make referrals. Talk to them about the nature and importance of religious faith in the lives of your members. Acquaint yourself with their fee schedules and particular areas of expertise. Ask about their counseling methods and the professional societies to which they belong. Compile a list of counselors in your area from whom your members can choose when needs arise.

11. Maintain confidentiality

- Do not share with anyone else reports of abuse and family violence made in confidence without the permission of the person making the report.
- Make it clear to anyone reporting an incidence of child abuse to you that you cannot accept such a report in confidence because of your moral responsibility to protect the child. In many places, you have a legal obligation to make a report to designated authorities. Offer to help the person alerting you to suspected child abuse to make a report to the local child protection agency. Otherwise, place the call yourself with their knowledge.
- Do not use reports of abuse made to you as sermon illustrations, even though you think you may have altered the details enough to maintain the anonymity of the persons involved.



A GUIDE FOR EMPOWERING A BATTERED WOMAN

Jesus radically changed the prevalent notions about power in His day. Illustrations abounded about the nature of power from the Roman perspective. Jesus said, “You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them . . . but it shall not be so among you” (Matt. 20:25-26). In Christ’s kingdom, personal power is not to be grasped and used to control and manipulate others. Power is for sharing and giving away in order to maximize the potential of every individual. To empower victim(s) of abuse and violence is to help them realize their own power to make decisions and assume control of their own lives. Empowerment is a means of helping a person grow beyond victimization toward becoming a survivor. You empower a victim when you:

- Encourage her to interact and share her experiences with others in a support group led by someone with specialized training.
- Help her transition from being a caretaker who focuses almost exclusively on the needs of others to taking better care of herself.
- Encourage her to become involved in activities which make her life meaningful now, rather than putting her own happiness on hold until her partner changes.
- Help her grow toward becoming a separate person from her partner, one who can differentiate her feelings of worth and of well-being from her relationship with him.
- Affirm her for decisions which indicate good judgment and encourage her to trust in her ability to continue to make wise decisions.
- Encourage her to keep a journal. There are many positive benefits to be gained from recording her successes and the positive steps made toward accomplishing her goals, as well as expressing in the journal her disappointments, frustrations and innermost feelings.
- Affirm her growth while allowing her to grow at her own pace.
- Gently confront her when she slips back into a typical victim stance characterized by helplessness, unhealthy care-taking of others, or assuming the role of rescuer in relationships.
- Prepare her for the emptiness and loneliness she may experience once she makes the decision to live apart from an abusive partner. Support her as she learns to live independently.
- Help her move toward forgiveness which can make it possible for her to move on to a new life. The process of forgiveness may lead to reconciliation in the relationship when the abuser has accepted responsibility for his actions, stopped the abuse, and entered into the process of healing the fear and pain the abuse has left behind. Forgiveness may also free her from bitterness and a desire to retaliate even when there has been no positive response on the part of the abuser and she is left to grieve the loss of a once significant relationship.



GUIDELINES FOR PASTORAL CARE OF AN ABUSED CHILD

Children who have been abused usually find it extremely difficult to tell anyone about the abuse. Most have been sworn to secrecy by their abusers and subjected to threats, bribes and extorted promises to secure their silence. If the perpetrator is a family member or someone in a significant relationship, the child may fear the loss of that relationship. He or she may also be afraid that the person abusing him or her may leave the home, or go to jail, or lose their job, etc. if any one finds out about the abuse. Some will have tried to disclose their situation to their mothers or another family member. Often, at least initially, other family members find it hard to believe that what the child is telling them is true.

Children may also have trouble disclosing abuse because they are burdened with guilt. They erroneously believe the abuse is somehow their fault and that they must be “bad” persons or this would not be happening to them. So they live with the confusion, the pain, the isolation, the secrecy, the sense of violation and betrayal brought about by the abuse.

When a child is able to disclose, or abuse is suspected and a report has been made, the child will need your support and encouragement to find healing from such a devastating experience and to handle the disruption of family and personal life that usually comes with such disclosure. Some helpful guidelines for pastoral care include:

- Find a place where you can talk privately with the child without the fear of others listening in.
- Believe the child. Rarely do children lie about abuse. Do not express shock either verbally or nonverbally.
- Remain calm. You may be feeling outraged that anyone would do such a thing. You may indeed be shocked at the identity of the alleged perpetrator. But if you show these emotions, the child will likely interpret them as your being upset with him or her. An abused child needs to sense that you have prepared yourself for this moment and that you know what to do in response to their disclosure.
- Reassure the child that they have done the right thing to tell you about the abuse and that you understand it must be very difficult to talk about this to anyone.
- Assure the child that the abuse is not his or her fault, that he or she is not “bad.”
- Do not probe for details. It is important that the investigation be conducted by a professional with specialized training in the area of child abuse and neglect.
- Let the child know you will do your best to protect and support him or her. Stay with them for as long as they need you, offering whatever gestures of comfort seem to help.
- Do not be overly critical of the perpetrator. In many cases, the child may care for and love the abuser, even though the child may be confused or hate what has been done to him or her.
- Use the child’s vocabulary and speak at a pace they can follow.
- Help the child to understand that in order to provide the help he or she and the family needs you will need to report what has been told to you to someone who can help. Tell them that a policeman and a person from an organization that helps children will be coming to hear their story. Encourage them that they do not need to be afraid. These are persons they can trust and who can help them and their family.
- Make a report to the designated child protective services agency in your area. Some children are comforted by hearing you place the call. Others find this an upsetting experience. You will have to use your best judgment.
- Protect the child’s privacy. Family members and siblings will need a brief statement about what has happened and what to expect. Other significant persons in the child’s life, such as teachers, child care personnel, extended family, may need the same brief report. Details need not be disclosed. All should be helped to understand that



what the child needs most from them now is love and support. If the child wants to talk, it is appropriate to listen with empathy, but others should not open any discussion of the abuse or probe the child for additional information.

- Offer continuing love and support. The child may be asked to tell his or her story repeatedly and the interviews may be difficult for the child. Your calm strength and presence will be needed at this time. You may need to reassure all concerned that, while this process is difficult, it is necessary to make sure everyone is protected and gets the help they need.
- Find support for yourself. You may be experiencing outrage or great disappointment at what has happened. You may experience fear about the outcome of the report you have made, especially if you have been close to the offender. If you have personally been the victim of abuse in the past, this experience may bring up issues of your own which need to be processed. Do not hesitate to seek professional counseling for yourself to provide the emotional support and guidance you need to be able to minister to this family in crisis.

