

# Press-Enterprise (Riverside, CA)

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## Answering Soft Cries for Help; Inland Churches Enlist Clergy in War Against Domestic Abuse

By Bettye Wells Miller; The Press-Enterprise

Although domestic violence is no stranger to those who gather in churches, mosques and synagogues, it is a subject seldom broached by clergy or lay leaders.

That is beginning to change.

Most mainline Protestant denominations and the Catholic Church have adopted policies in the last decade that advise clergy how to respond to parishioners seeking help. Some evangelical Christians and Jewish and Muslim women's groups are organizing conferences and training programs.

Two years ago, the California Department of Health Services awarded California State University Channel Islands \$ 596,500 for a Faith Leaders and Domestic Violence Project to educate religious leaders.

Since 2001, Alternatives to Domestic Violence, which is based in Riverside, has held three conferences for clergy and lay leaders. The Redlands-based Cops & Clergy Network will focus on the issue at a Faith and Justice Summit next year.

California Baptist University, a Southern Baptist college in Riverside, has offered domestic violence workshops for graduate marital and family counseling students for five years. It may open them to the general public this year.

"Like others in our culture, people of faith are coming to terms with the statistics on violence in the family setting," said Nancy Nason-Clark, a sociology professor at the University of New Brunswick and author of "The Battered Wife: How Christians Confront Family Violence."

"Walking with women who have experienced violence on the road to recovery is a central role for faith communities and also, keeping men accountable for their behavior in the family setting," Nason-Clark said in an e-mail.

The experiences of abused women vary considerably.

Nancy, a San Bernardino teacher now legally separated from her husband, has found emotional support from the pastor and congregation of the mission church she attends in Moreno Valley, as well as an offer of groceries, as needed. However, elders at the parent church in Los Angeles County told her she should not have left her husband, she said by phone.

Nancy, who asked that her last name not be used because she fears for her safety, said she left her husband of three years in January because of mental and emotional abuse.

“My husband doesn’t get physical,” she said by phone. “There’s coercion. I have to get permission to get a haircut. . . . My church doesn’t see this as abuse. It’s being a bad husband, but it isn’t abuse. . . . I’m scared.”

Church leaders need to understand that mental and emotional abuse can lead to physical abuse, she said.

“If they don’t deal with it when it’s a little problem it will become a bigger problem,” Nancy said. “They’re ignoring sin and letting it continue. . . . Part of Christianity is the love you’re supposed to have. Perfect love casts out fear. You should not have fear in a marriage relationship.”

When Anita Silvestri could no longer ignore the violence in her marriage three years ago, she sought help from her Riverside church.

“I didn’t know where to turn,” she said. “I had never told anyone in my family or my friends.”

Members of Calvary Presbyterian Church supported her and her husband.

That experience prompted the Riverside artist to start a domestic violence support group at Calvary Presbyterian—an effort that her church encouraged and supports financially.

The Rev. Bonnie Orth, of Presbyterians Against Domestic Violence Network, said some clergy ask the same question posed by the secular world: “Why does she stay?” The question, she said, should be, “Why does he batter?”

Domestic violence – from spousal abuse, dating violence, sexual assault and elder abuse – occurs in faith groups at about the same rate as it does in the general population, experts say.

It is an uncomfortable topic for many. People of faith are no different, say clergy, domestic violence counselors and congregation members.

“People feel embarrassed or are ashamed,” Silvestri said. “It’s really sad since it can happen to anybody, from all classes, all education levels, all races.”

## BARRIERS AND BELIEFS

One of every three or four women will be physically or sexually abused by a husband, boyfriend or other relative, according to the U.S. Department of Justice. About 90 percent of domestic violence victims are women; 10 percent are men, according to the U.S. Bureau of Justice Statistics.

Ken Pearce, associate professor of psychology at Cal Baptist, said as many as 20 percent of men may be abused, based on his experience as a family therapist in Oklahoma.

“There’s not as much violence” by women against men, he said by phone. “It’s more mental or abuse with words. Men get more explosive; women are not as likely to take weapons or beat up on partners.”

Misty Jardine, program coordinator for the Yucaipa Outreach office of San Bernardino Sexual Assault Services, said half of the women in her domestic violence support groups are churchgoers.

“There are churches that are supportive of the victim seeking counseling,” she said by phone. “There are others who don’t condone leaving a spouse because of domestic violence. I have several clients now who are dealing with that.”

Orth said some clergy don’t understand how dangerous domestic violence can be and routinely send women home to their abusers.

“They believe the marriage covenant shouldn’t be broken,” she said. “We firmly believe that domestic violence breaks the marriage covenant.”

Restoring that covenant should not be the first priority in an abusive relationship, said Pearce, who pastored an independent Baptist church in Oklahoma City before joining the Cal Baptist faculty.

“There has to be safety for the woman and accountability for the abuser,” he said. “After that, maybe there is the possibility of restoration of the relationship.”

Pastors who counsel victims to return to abusive spouses underestimate the danger, Pearce said.

“They’re trying to restore (the marriage) without any accountability and that’s the wrong order,” he said. “I’m all for restoration, after safety and accountability. . . . I’ve always suggested legal separation first.”

Faith leaders often feel caught between the rhetoric of their particular group and the reality of families in crisis, Nason-Clark said.

“Groups that hold very high ideals for the family are sometimes reluctant to speak out when abuse occurs and other times they are at a loss as to what to do,” she said.

Yasmin Attar, coordinator of the Faith Leaders and Domestic Violence Project, said workshops conducted in San Bernardino County and elsewhere in the last year addressed why domestic violence is hard for faith groups to talk about. Another workshop is planned in Riverside County this spring, she said.

### ALWAYS WATCHFUL

“The barriers they face often are breaking through the silence and the shame, self-blame, the use or misuse of scriptures to perpetuate the problem, denial, lack of information or blaming the victim,” Attar said by phone.

Clergy are required by law to report abuse of children, seniors and disabled dependents, but not spouses, she said.

The Rev. Woody Hall, senior pastor of Lutheran Church of Our Savior in San Bernardino, and others said they try to be alert to the possibility of abuse in their congregations.

“I’m always watchful for things I can’t account for,” Hall said.

Faith can be a powerful source of strength and comfort to people in abusive relationships, or a negative influence, he said.

“The good news is that if a person is part of a community of faith, that can be a support system for them when they’re hurting,” he said.

Faith leaders need to learn the signs of abuse, acknowledge the danger, and offer physical, emotional and spiritual help, Jardine said.

“I have had several clients where their church helped them for months to get back on their feet,” she said. “Often the victim doesn’t have money. Emotional support, meeting with their pastors, groups in the church supporting them” are critical to healing and recovery, she said.

The Calvary Presbyterian effort is unusual, said Jardine of San Bernardino Sexual Assault Services.

“That’s a huge, amazing step for a church to take,” she said. “They’re letting members know it won’t be tolerated.”

### NO JUSTIFICATION

The religious teachings of Judaism, Christianity or Islam do not justify spousal abuse, although some men contend that certain texts condone abusive treatment of wives, clergy and women’s advocates said.

“All religious texts may be used inappropriately to overpower another human being,” said Kausar Ahmad, a Temecula consultant who has done domestic violence training for South Asian and Middle Eastern Muslim communities since 1991. “Violence of any sort is unacceptable and it is not appropriate to use any religious document to justify it.”

Spousal abuse “totally violates Islamic principles,” said Laila Al-Marayati, a Los Angeles obstetrician and spokeswoman for the Muslim Women’s League. “I do feel there has been progress, especially among the male leadership talking about it. Ten to 15 years ago people were in denial.”

Muslim women face considerable pressure to keep the family together, Ahmad and Al-Marayati said. For many, immigrant status as well as language and cultural barriers can make it difficult to seek help.

Jewish women are commanded during wedding ceremonies to maintain “shalom bayit,” domestic tranquility. That commandment sometimes becomes a prison, Rabbi Harold Caminker of Temple Beth El in Riverside said by phone.

The couple also declares that “God is within that relationship. Therefore if you cause harm to your beloved . . . you’re also wronging God,” he said.

Domestic violence is “harder for Jews to talk about because for so long it was not considered a Jewish problem,” Caminker said. “The Jewish home was thought to be a refuge. In the modern era people are speaking out. We never acknowledged that it did exist. We have to make amends for our silence because silence kills and we all know it.”

Spousal abuse is a sin, said the Rev. Howard Lincoln, spokesman for the Roman Catholic Diocese of San Bernardino.

“God created us and he gave personal dignity equally to men and women,” he said by phone. “We never advocate a woman staying in an abuse situation. We cannot advocate divorce, but under such a situation we would advocate a separation. . . . We hope the marriage can continue in the future.”

Lincoln said his seminary training included instruction on spotting signs of abuse, even when victims try to hide their injuries.

“It may be necessary that the authorities be called to get the abusing spouse into appropriate treatment,” he said. The diocese refers couples to Catholic Charities for help, he said.

Some Christian men who abuse their wives justify the violence by misusing the Apostle Paul’s teachings about submission, said Pastor Felix Jones III of All People Unity Baptist Church in Redlands.

The Bible does not say that women are to be subservient, Hall said. “That can be destructive to personhood,” he said.

“Scripture says the husband is to love his wife as Christ loved the church,” Jones said by phone. “Christ died for the church and submitted himself to that. Loving your wife is not violent. Scripture also teaches that until we have healed and reconciled with our wives, a husband cannot have reconciliation and communion with the Father.”

Submission must be understood within the context of love, respect and accountability, Pearce said.

“Submission is not being run over by a Mack truck,” he said. “We all have to submit to one another. We also have to be accountable to one another. There has to be a loving and accountable relationship.”

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### FAITH-BASED PROGRAMS

#### FAITHTRUST INSTITUTE

[www.faithtrustinstitute.org](http://www.faithtrustinstitute.org)

Inter religious educational organization that addresses sexual and domestic violence, and provides training and printed resources. (206) 634-1903

#### JEWISH WOMEN INTERNATIONAL

[www.jewishwomen.org](http://www.jewishwomen.org)

Resource center for information on domestic violence in the Jewish community. Sponsoring an International Conference on Domestic Abuse in the Jewish Community on March 20-23 in Washington, D.C.

(800) 343-2823 or (202) 857-1300

#### TASK FORCE TO STOP ABUSE AGAINST WOMEN

[www.abuseofwomen.org](http://www.abuseofwomen.org)

A project of the World Evangelical Alliance Commission on Women’s Concerns. The task force encourages evangelical churches to educate themselves about domestic violence, make houses of worship safe places for women to disclose abuse, and ensure an appropriate response to abuse.

(661) 746-4748

#### THE BLACK CHURCH AND DOMESTIC VIOLENCE INSTITUTE

[www.bcdvi.org](http://www.bcdvi.org)

Provides training for clergy and encourages partnerships between churches and domestic violence prevention agencies.

(770) 909-0715

#### MUSLIM WOMEN’S LEAGUE

A nonprofit Muslim American organization working to implement the values of Islam and emphasize the status of women as free, equal and vital contributors to society.

(626) 358-0335

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## RESOURCES

NATIONAL JEWISH DOMESTIC VIOLENCE HOTLINE: (888) 883-2323

NATIONAL DOMESTIC VIOLENCE HOTLINE: (800)-799-SAFE (7233)

NISHMA LOS ANGELES ORTHODOX COUNSELING PROGRAM: (818) 623-0300;  
24-HOUR HOTLINE (323) 761-8816

PROJECT SARAH (STOP ABUSIVE RELATIONSHIPS AT HOME): (619) 291-0473 X108,  
(877) 366-1818 TOLL FREE

NARIKA: 800-215-7308. Addresses domestic violence in the South Asian community.

MUSLIMS AGAINST FAMILY VIOLENCE: (510) 317-0383

PEACEFUL FAMILIES PROJECT: (703) 759-6378

ALTERNATIVES TO DOMESTIC VIOLENCE: (951) 320-1370

SAN BERNARDINO SEXUAL ASSAULT SERVICES: (909) 885-8884

STATEWIDE CALIFORNIA COALITION FOR BATTERED WOMEN: (888) 722-2952

SHELTER FROM THE STORM: (800) 775-6055

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DOMESTIC VIOLENCE: Faith communities are beginning to grapple with the problem of domestic violence in their midst. Here is a selection of scriptures from Judaism, Christianity and Islam that address the relationship between husbands and wives.

## JUDAISM

### Marriage

Teaching: Husbands are enjoined to “love her (wife) as oneself and honor her more than oneself.” – Yevamot 62 (from the Talmud)

Be careful about the honor of your wife because blessing enters the house only because of your wife. – Baba Metzia 59a (from the Talmud)

Application: Commandment that women must maintain “shalom bayit” – domestic tranquility – makes it especially difficult for some women to leave an abusive husband.

## Violence

Teaching: “To save even one life is to save the whole world. To destroy even one life is to destroy the whole world.” – Sanhedrin 4: Misnah 5

Application: Intervention is required when someone’s life or safety is in danger.

## Male/Female Relationships

Teaching: “So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them . . . and while he slept took one of his ribs and closed up its place with flesh; and the rib which the Lord God had taken from the man he made into a woman and brought her to the man. Then the man said, ‘this at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called Woman, because she was taken out of Man.’” – Gen. 1:27; 2:22-23

Application: Men and women are both God’s creation whose perspectives are complementary.

## CHRISTIANITY

### Marriage

Teaching: “Wives, submit to your husbands as if to the Lord. For a husband is head of the wife as Christ is head of the church. He is savior of the body. Like the church submits to Christ, wives should submit to their husbands, in everything. Husbands, love your wives just as Christ loved the church. . . . In the same way, husbands should love their wives as they do their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. . . .” – Ephesians 5:22-28

Application: The Apostle Paul’s admonition to wives to submit to their husbands is sometimes used to justify abusive behavior. Other Christians say the passage was not intended to make women subservient, but to characterize the relationship between husbands and wives as like that of Christ’s love for the church.

### Violence

Teaching: “Be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to get angry. Your anger can never make things right in God’s sight.” – James 1:19-20

Application: Violence is sinful.

### Male/Female Relationships

Teaching: “But I want you to understand that Christ is the head of every man, and the man is the head of a woman, and God is the head of Christ. . . . For man does not originate from woman, but woman from man; for indeed man was not created for the woman’s sake, but woman for the



man's sake. Therefore the woman ought to have a symbol of authority on her head, because of the angels." – 1 Cor. 11:3, 8-10

Application: Ranges from putting women in a subservient role to an understanding of men and women as complimentary creations of God.

## ISLAM

### Marriage

Teaching: "The most perfect in faith, amongst believers is he who is best in manner and kindest to his wife." - From the Hadith, or sayings of the Prophet Muhammad

"And as for those women whose ill-willed rebellion you have reason to fear, admonish them first; then leave them alone in bed; then beat (or tap or leave, depending on translation); and if thereupon they pay you no heed, do not seek to harm." – Quran 4:34

Application: Interpretations range from permitting wife-beating to treating women gently and with respect.

### Violence

Teaching: ". . . Do not take life, which Allah has made sacred, except through justice and the law. He orders this so that you may acquire wisdom." – Quran 6:151

Application: Ranges from justification for acts of terrorism to the basis for peace-making and restraint.

### Male/Female Relationships

Teaching: "And among his signs is this, that he created for you mates from among yourselves, and you may dwell in tranquility with them, and he has put love and mercy between your (hearts)..." – Quran 30:21

Application: Ranges from oppressive interpretations under the Taliban in Afghanistan to encouraging women to attend university and have careers.

SOURCES: VARIOUS CLERGY, JEWISH WOMEN INTERNATIONAL, FAITHTRUST INSTITUTE, WORLD EVANGELICAL ALLIANCE WOMEN'S COMMISSION, ISLAMIC SOCIETY OF NORTH AMERICA.

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