

A Safe Space Realized:  
A Congregational Resource for  
Care, Advocacy, and Action for Intimate Partner Violence

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# I. Introduction

“That would never happen here.” “Nobody here looks like an abuser.” “Our members are respectable members of society. Abuse only happens in less respectable places.” “There is no way she is telling the truth. She is known for being dramatic.” “Oh, that is just a teenager that is angry at her parents.” These are just a few of the stereotypes, myths, and inaccuracies that interrupt conversations about intimate partner violence. Perhaps it is because we are too afraid to admit we are broken people. Perhaps it is because it is too difficult to think our friends, our colleagues, and the people we consider family may be batterers or may be experiencing abuse. Perhaps it is too difficult to fathom violence against any human, let alone a child or someone we know. Whatever the reasons, congregations must be aware of intimate partner violence, who is affected, how we can learn to hear stories, believe them, take action, and advocate for the battered.

In order to be a safe space for battered persons, it is important to understand a few definitions and statistics about intimate partner violence. According to the Center for Disease Control, intimate partner violence describes physical, sexual, or psychological harm by a current or former partner or spouse.<sup>1</sup> This type of violence can occur among heterosexual or same-sex couples and does not require sexual intimacy. Additionally, the National Coalition Against Domestic Violence lists statistics that are essential to the conversation. According to the NCADV, in the United States alone:

- On average, nearly 20 people per minute are physically abused by an intimate partner.
- 1 in 3 women and 1 in 4 men have been victims of [some form of] physical violence by an intimate partner within their lifetime.
- 1 in 5 women and 1 in 7 men have been victims of severe physical violence by an intimate partner in their lifetime.
- 1 in 7 women and 1 in 18 men have been stalked by an intimate partner during their lifetime to the point in which they felt very fearful or believed that they or someone close to them would be harmed or killed.
- On a typical day, there are more than 20,000 phone calls placed to domestic violence hotlines nationwide.
- In domestic violence homicides, women are six times more likely to be killed when there is a gun in the house.
- Intimate partner violence accounts for 15% of all violent crime.

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<sup>1</sup> “Injury Prevention and Control: Division of Violence Prevention,” Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, accessed July 27, 2015, <http://www.cdc.gov/ViolencePrevention/intimatepartnerviolence/index.html>.

- Women between the ages of 18-24 are most commonly abused by an intimate partner.<sup>2</sup>

While these statistics may feel overwhelming, we have the ability to support the people in our congregation and community that have or are currently experiencing intimate partner violence. The church has a long history of overcoming seemingly great obstacles. Our ability to vision, hear, listen, and act will help us create a space that supports all people. Furthermore, as a congregation within the United Church of Christ, we are often called to action in matters of justice. The UCC encourages us, in a variety of ways, to be aware of intimate partner violence in our congregation and community and offers resources to advocate for those in the midst of violent situations.

### UCC Statements on IPV

The UCC meets every two years for a denomination gathering, known as General Synod. At General Synod 13, a resolution titled, “Resolution On Violence In Relation to Women” was voted on and passed. This resolution sought to bring awareness of domestic violence to local congregations. Specifically, the resolution states, “Therefore, the Thirteenth General Synod of the United Church of Christ calls upon the United Church Board for Homeland Ministries to draft a major pronouncement and proposals for action on Violence in Relation to Women for the consideration of the 14th General Synod, and to be in consultation with the Coordinating Center for Women in Church and Society, the Office for Church In Society, and the Commission for Racial Justice in preparation of the pronouncement and proposals.

The Thirteenth General Synod of the United Church of Christ calls upon local churches, associations and conferences to study the issue; to raise consciousness about it; to minister with sensitivity to victims of violence through support of existing shelters and agencies; to engage in public policy advocacy for adequate funding of such shelters and agencies.”<sup>3</sup> The full resolution, which includes its specific intents, can be located at <http://www.uccfiles.com/pdf/RESOLUTION-ON-VIOLENCE-IN-RELATION-TO-WOMEN-GS-13.pdf>.

At General Synod 14, a major pronouncement supporting the original resolution was passed. This pronouncement established the theological foundations for care and action for victims and perpetrators of intimate partner violence. In addition, a proposal was put forth to

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<sup>2</sup> “Statistics,” National Coalition Against Domestic Violence, accessed July 27, 2015, <http://www.ncadv.org/learn/statistics>.

<sup>3</sup> “Resolution On Violence in Relation to Women,” United Church of Christ, accessed July 27, 2015, <http://www.uccfiles.com/pdf/RESOLUTION-ON-VIOLENCE-IN-RELATION-TO-WOMEN-GS-13.pdf>.

encourage churches to fully engage in conversations and actions in response to intimate partner violence. The pronouncement states specifically:

WHEREAS, the Fourteenth General Synod of the United Church of Christ has adopted the Pronouncement on Violence Against Women and since Peace and Family Life are priorities of the United Church of Christ; we experience increasing awareness of violence against women, children and the elderly, and we are called as Christians to be Good Samaritans, to take action on behalf of those who suffer.

THEREFORE, the Fourteenth General Synod of the United Church of Christ calls upon all United Church of Christ churches, Conferences, national Instrumentalities, and other bodies:

- to address the issue of violence against women, by raising consciousness among clergy and laity;
- to work with ecumenical and secular agencies to develop and support hot lines, rape crisis centers, shelters for abused women and children, and pro-grams for abusers;
- to work with schools, churches and hospitals to establish programs to educate prospective parents, parents, and other caretakers of children in the realities of child development, parenting skills, and human sexuality: 6
- to advocate legislation to protect abused persons and to bring abusers into rehabilitation programs, seeking all prompt, compassionate and just legal remedies for this abuse.
- the local United Church of Christ churches to minister to the victims of violence and to their abusers and to develop and support, in cooperation with other agen-cies, shelters for victims and programs for abusers:
- the Conferences to advocate on the state level for legislation that addresses the issues of violence against women and to advocate for shelters for victims and programs for abusers.....<sup>4</sup>

The full pronouncement can be found at <http://www.uccfiles.com/pdf/THE-PRONOUNCEMENT-ON-VIOLENCE-IN-RELATION-TO-WOMEN-GS-14.pdf>.

This pronouncement inspires us to be advocates for the voiceless and create spaces that feel safe from violence. The United Church of Christ takes our call to advocate for the oppressed very seriously. As a member of this denomination, it is our responsibility, as a local church, to attempt to live into this call as we are able.

### Shhh!!!! That Would Never Happen Here

As a denomination, we understand violence, particularly against women and children, is a church issue. We, as the local church, are called to embody God's love for all. While we may feel we already do this, the reality is we can and should do better. The more prepared we are, the better able we will be to handle a crisis of intimate partner violence. Such work can feel overwhelming and may even feel as though the ministerial staff are the only ones who need to address IPV. While it is true that studies indicate 43% of victims seek assistance from clergy, it takes an entire congregation to support victims.<sup>5</sup> If we are aware of the people around us: their actions, their absences, their words, their habits, and their worries, an

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<sup>4</sup> "The Pronouncement On Violence in Relation to Women," United Church of Christ, accessed July 27, 2015, <http://www.uccfiles.com/pdf/THE-PRONOUNCEMENT-ON-VIOLENCE-IN-RELATION-TO-WOMEN-GS-14.pdf>.

<sup>5</sup> Rob Rotunda, Gail Williamson, and Michelle Penfold, "Clergy Response to Domestic Violence: A Preliminary Survey of Clergy Members, Victims, and Batterers," *Pastoral Psychology* 52, no. 4 (March 2004): 353.

opportunity to help may arise. Knowing what to look and listen for provides the potential to save a life. As with anything, if you see something, say something.

It can feel intimidating to imagine that a member of the church family is either a victim or a perpetrator. Knowing how to respond in a safe and effective way can help us move beyond the paralyzing fear and disappointment of knowing those in our midst may be harming people we care about. Being proactive gives us the ability to break down structures of privilege and power. We are a society that is continually exposed to violence in our daily lives. As a result, we are often unaffected by the violence closest to us. Violence has a purpose, that is, to keep systems of domination in place, whether it be in the context of economic globalization, or of social and cultural structures or ecclesial structures. Violence is not a symptom of a dysfunctional society—it is so 'normal' that many do not react to it any longer!<sup>6</sup> Being prepared allows us to be a more effective church. The word “sanctuary” literally means, “a place of refuge and safety.”<sup>7</sup> Facing the reality of Intimate Partner Violence and having a clear plan in place will assist in upsetting the systems that prevent us from being “a place of refuge.”

## II. Protecting Our Children

*People were bringing little children to him in order that he might touch them; and the disciples spoke sternly to them. But when Jesus saw this, he was indignant and said to them, “Let the little children come to me; do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs. Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it.” And he took them up in his arms, laid his hands on them, and blessed them. –Mark 10:13-16 (NRSV)<sup>8</sup>*

While the culture regarding children in church has shifted, there continues to be an understanding among a small group of church members that believe children should be seen and not heard. Children should be their wiggly, creative, and energetic selves in the church. To deny them of their liveliness is a disservice to them and ourselves. They are a vital part of our congregation and as such, deserve our respect and protection. Jesus called the children to them, because he recognized them as a sacred part of humanity. As such, we are to give special care and attention to them. When we perpetuate a message that children are too loud or not welcome in worship or should be segregated to a different part of church, we are theologically stating that they are not treasured members of the congregation. In order to subvert those messages and create a safe space for our children, we must learn what it means to protect our children. This section will explain what child abuse is, signs of child abuse, an action plan when abuse is suspected, and a brief explanation of Safe Church policies.

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<sup>6</sup> Aruna Gnanadason, “‘We Have Spoken so Long O God: When Will We Be Heard?’ Theological Reflections On Overcoming Violence Against Women,” *Theology and Sexuality* 13 (2006): 10.

<sup>7</sup> *Collins English Dictionary*, Digital ed., s.v. “Sanctuary,” accessed January 2, 2016, <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/sanctuary>.

<sup>8</sup> Mark 10:13-16 (New Revised Standard Version).

## Let's Define What We Mean

Every state has slightly differing laws and definitions for what constitutes child abuse. Since this resource will be used in Connecticut, it is important to understand how Connecticut defines child abuse and its differing forms. According to the Connecticut Department of Children and Families, abuse is defined as, **“is a non-accidental injury to a child which, regardless of motive, is inflicted or allowed to be inflicted by the person responsible for the child’s care.”** Non-accidental injuries include, **“any injury that is at variance with the history given and maltreatment, such as but not limited to, malnutrition, sexual molestation, deprivation of necessities, emotional maltreatment, or cruel punishment.”**<sup>9</sup> These may seem like very broad terms and may also feel like lots of things could be viewed as abuse. That is why the different forms of abuse are more explicitly defined below.

Physical abuse is defined as, **“any physical injury inflicted other than by accidental means, any injury at variance with the history given of them, or a child’s condition which is the result of maltreatment such as malnutrition, deprivation of necessities or cruel punishment.”**<sup>10</sup> Just because bruises or other wounds are not visible, does not mean physical abuse is not taking place. It is not unusual for perpetrators to choose places covered by clothing. Do not discount a child’s story just because you do not see markings.

There are, however, possible indicators of physical abuse. Possible injuries due to physical abuse include, but are not limited to: **head injuries, bruises, cuts, or lacerations, internal injuries, burns, scalds, reddening or blistering of the tissue through application of heat by fire, chemical substances, cigarettes, matches, electricity, scalding water, friction, injuries to bone, muscle, cartilage, ligaments fractures, dislocations, sprains, strains, displacements, and hematomas.**<sup>11</sup> While some of these are natural occurrences in a child’s life (i.e bruises and cuts), a combination of multiple injuries or frequent injuries are things to be aware. Awareness is one of the best tools a congregation has. Being aware of the children present, getting to know them, their likes and dislikes, their dispositions, and families are essential for establishing a strong church community. This also aides in an awareness when there is a shift in one or more of the aforementioned characteristics.

A very specific type of physical abuse that may be very difficult to fathom, but nonetheless relevant, is sexual abuse. According to Connecticut Department of Children and Families, also known as DCF, **sexual abuse is defined as, “any incident of sexual contact involving a child that is inflicted or allowed to be inflicted by the person responsible for the child’s care.”**<sup>12</sup> It is also important to be clear that consent given by

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<sup>9</sup> “Definitions of Child Abuse and Neglect,” Connecticut Department of Children and Families, accessed December 29, 2015, <http://www.ct.gov/dcf/cwp/view.asp?a=2534&q=316956#Abuse>.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

a minor is not actually consent. Anyone who seeks any type of sexual relationship with a minor is automatically in a position of power. This means it cannot be a relationship of mutuality, thus rendering any sexual contact as sexual abuse. **With that in mind, sexual abuse includes, but is not limited to: rape, intercourse, sodomy, fondling, oral sex, incest, and sexual penetration (digital, penile, or foreign objects.) Sexual exploitation, which is considered sexual abuse, includes: permitting, allowing, coercing, or forcing a child to participate in pornography, and/or engage in sexual behavior.**<sup>13</sup> Again, a relationship with other families in the congregation allows us to notice when there is a possible shift in the way a child reacts to an adult. While this may be an innocent shift, awareness is a good first line of defense in preventing any form of abuse.

Because there are no physical injuries, emotional abuse may be one of the most difficult forms of abuse to identify. However, it can often be the most damaging because the effects can be long lasting. Again, according to DCF, **emotional abuse is defined as, “the result of cruel or unconscionable acts and/or statements made, threatened to be made, or allowed to be made by the person responsible for the child’s care that have a direct effect on the child.”**<sup>14</sup> An example of emotional abuse would be a caregiver making a statement such as, “Should you really eat that donut? You are already too fat.” Repeating this statement or similar statements in private and public is emotionally abusive. Public shaming and humiliation is one indicator of possible emotional abuse. **As DCF clarifies, “The observable and substantial impairment of the child’s psychological, cognitive, emotional and/or social well-being and functioning must be related to the behavior of the person responsible for the child’s care.” Observing this behavior or behaviors closely related, such as: repeated negative acts or statements directed at the child; exposure to repeated violent, brutal, or intimidating acts or statements among members of the household; cruel or unusual actions used in the attempt to gain submission, enforce maximum control, or to modify the child’s behavior; or rejection of the child are often observations of emotional abuse.**<sup>15</sup> Do not dismiss this behavior as playful or innocent. It is neither and should be taken seriously.

### What Am I Looking For?

While this list may seem daunting, there are warning signs that we are able to pay attention to. Knowing these warning signs will be helpful in identification of a possible issue. Let us be clear, it is essential for the church community to be aware of the children and families in the congregation. It is even more important to get to know the children in our midst. Identifying child abuse, in any form, should be approached with caution and as much knowledge as possible. Understanding possible symptoms of child abuse will assist the process of identification and can help to shape the action plan. Symptoms of various forms of child abuse have been identified by the Mayo Clinic. This is not an exhaustive list but will

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

be helpful. Again, a warning sign is just that: a warning sign. A warning sign is not an instant indicator of child abuse. Children may find it difficult to open up to adults, so being aware of these warning signs have the possibility of opening a conversation.

**Overall, according to the Mayo Clinic, warning signs include:**

- **Withdrawal from friends or usual activities**
- **Changes in behavior (aggression, anger, hostility, hyperactivity, or changes in school performance)**
- **Depression, anxiety or unusual fears or a sudden loss of self-confidence**
- **An apparent lack of supervision; frequent absences from school or reluctance to ride the school bus**
- **Reluctance to leave school activities, as if he or she doesn't want to go home**
- **Attempts at running away**
- **Rebellious or defiant behavior**
- **Attempts at suicide.**<sup>16</sup>

Symptoms will vary according to the type of abuse but there are also particular warning signs for the different forms. The Mayo Clinic recognizes the following for particular forms of abuse:

### **Physical abuse signs and symptoms**

- Unexplained injuries, such as bruises, fractures or burns
- Injuries that don't match the given explanation
- Untreated medical or dental problems<sup>17</sup>

### **Sexual abuse signs and symptoms**

- Sexual behavior or knowledge that's inappropriate for the child's age
- Pregnancy or a sexually transmitted infection
- Blood in the child's underwear
- Statements that he or she was sexually abused
- Trouble walking or sitting or complaints of genital pain
- Abuse of other children sexually<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> "Diseases and Conditions: Child Abuse," Mayo Clinic, accessed December 29, 2015, <http://www.mayoclinic.org/diseases-conditions/child-abuse/basics/symptoms/con-20033789>.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

## **Emotional abuse signs and symptoms**

- Delayed or inappropriate emotional development
- Loss of self-confidence or self-esteem
- Social withdrawal or a loss of interest or enthusiasm
- Depression
- Headaches or stomachaches with no medical cause
- Avoidance of certain situations, such as refusing to go to school or ride the bus
- Desperately seeks affection
- A decrease in school performance or loss of interest in school
- Loss of previously acquired developmental skills<sup>19</sup>

This is not an exhaustive list of symptoms. However, it is a very good place to start. Please remember that a warning sign or symptom may not be an immediate indication of abuse. At the same time, they should not be ignored. So, once warning signs have been observed, what do we do? This church has Safe Church policies in place to spell out some of our obligations. Following that, a specific Action Plan will be explained.

### **What it Means to be a Safe Church**

Safe Church Policies have become synonymous with “legalities.” While Safe Church is a program created by insurance companies to protect churches from lawsuits, it does much more than that. Safe Church protects our children. By having Safe Church policies, we are able to educate our staff, our volunteers, our parents, and congregation, as a whole. While Safe Church Education can feel complex, there are some very simple lessons from Safe Church that the entire church should be made aware.

1. All paid staff should have a criminal background check. This is a non-negotiable.
2. Paid staff should attend a safe church/boundary training workshop. The first should cover all the aspects of safe church and the following years can be refresher courses.
3. Sunday school volunteers should also have background checks. This may seem intrusive or an unnecessary expense. However, this legally protects the church, as well as ensures our volunteers are safe for our children. Again, it may seem as though we know the people in our midst. It may also feel as though we are pre-emptively accusing people of misconduct. This is not the case. This is a step to ensure the safety of our children. They are an integral part of our congregation and this is our opportunity to protect them.
4. Sunday School volunteers should attend an initial Safe Church workshop and then subsequent refresher courses.

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

5. An annual Sunday worship should focus on educating the congregation on child abuse and the church policies. Speakers from Prevent Child Abuse America or the United Church of Christ Pension Board may be good options. April is Prevent Child Abuse month, so this may be a good option for a special service.
6. Church leaders are responsible for relaying an abuse prevention plan to the congregation. Sermons, bulletin inserts, letters, newsletter articles, and special adult Sunday School classes are possible educational opportunities. In addition, potential new members should be introduced to the church policies in a new members' class.
7. In general, there are 4 things every congregation member should remember. They are the easiest and most effective first line of defense.
  - a. **Minimize isolation.** This is where the rule of three comes into play. In any activity where children are present, there should be at least three people present. This can be one adult and two children or two adults and one child. Avoid a 1:1 ratio as much as possible. Classrooms should have large windows. If they do not, the door should remain open. Children should be accompanied to the bathroom but again, avoid a 1:1 ratio.
  - b. **Wear nametags.** It is helpful to not only adults but children to wear nametags. Nametags allow us to get to know one another and names help children be more comfortable in their surroundings. It is not a difficult task and creates a safer community.
  - c. **Be accountable to one another.** If an activity is ending and one child is left, there should be two adults that stay. If only one child is in a car transport situation, that child should sit in the back seat. Parents should know when a child or youth is being picked up and when they are being dropped off. If meeting with a youth, meet in a public place. Again, let parents and paid church staff know the plan. Do not assume a parent is okay with you driving or meeting a child. Speak with them and get permission. Never assume anything. We all know the saying.
  - d. **Be aware of the power and control dynamic.** Children are vulnerable to abuse because of the imbalance of power related to age, size, control, and authority. This imbalance is even found in two children of different ages and sizes. In order to create more of a balance, in situations where children are paired together, particularly for the bathroom, pair them up according to similar age and size. In addition, have a bathroom monitor. With youth volunteers, a rule of thumb is no college volunteers. The age gap is small enough to create possible intimate relationships but big enough to create a dangerous power and control dynamic. College age volunteers are encouraged to pair with an adult and be with younger children.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> James F., Jr. Cobble, Richard R. Hammar, and Steven W. Klipowicz, *Reducing the Risk II: Making Your Church Safe from Child Sexual Abuse* (Matthews: Christian Ministry Resources, 2003), 42-44, 64.

Following these Safe Church policies will protect adults, the congregation, the church, and most of all our children. They lay a common foundation for creating a safe space and putting everyone on the same page. Additionally, just remembering the four actions will immediately make our space safer. In reality, these four are not difficult to remember or implement.

## What Action Do I Need to Take?

We are a church and that means that we are a diverse group of people, complete with different understandings and experiences. Some of us have children and some of us do not. However, the children in our congregation are an essential part of our community and it is imperative that we do our part to protect them from abuse.

In Paul's first letter to the Corinthians, he states:

For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and we were all made to drink of one Spirit. Indeed, the body does not consist of one member but of many. If the foot would say, “Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body,” that would not make it any less a part of the body. And if the ear would say, “Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body,” that would not make it any less a part of the body. If the whole body were an eye, where would the hearing be? If the whole body were hearing, where would the sense of smell be? But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose. If all were a single member, where would the body be? As it is, there are many members, yet one body. The eye cannot say to the hand, “I have no need of you,” nor again the head to the feet, “I have no need of you.” On the contrary, the members of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and those members of the body that we think less honorable we clothe with greater honor, and our less respectable members are treated with greater respect; whereas our more respectable members do not need this. But God has so arranged the body, giving the greater honor to the inferior member, that there may be no dissension within the body, but the members may have the same care for one another. If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it. Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it.<sup>21</sup>

This is what it means to be the church. Paul very clearly asserts that those we perceive as weaker are indispensable. Children need care. They need our protection. They need us to be their advocates. If we do not and one child suffers from abuse, not only have we failed them but we, too, will suffer in sorrow. Jesus called the children to him. They are a part of our community and they deserve our care and attention.

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<sup>21</sup> 1 Cor. 12:14-27 (New Revised Standard Version).

Since it is our honor to care for them, what should you do if you suspect abuse? Here are a few easy steps.

1. **Attend a Safe Church workshop.** This will make you feel more prepared.
2. Children that are abused rarely feel comfortable opening up to an adult. If a child confides in you, **LISTEN!**
3. **LISTEN** with care and concern.
4. **BELIEVE** them!
5. **BELIEVE** them some more. It is not your job to confront the accused but it is your job to listen and believe them. If you do not, they may never tell anybody else. This is dangerous.
6. Do not ask a bunch of leading questions. Just listen and believe. Tell them you are going to support them.
7. **IMMEDIATELY** tell the pastor, CE director, or youth minister. While in the state of CT, CE directors and youth ministers are not considered mandatory reporters, they will often confide in the minister or go ahead and report.
8. Make sure **SOMEBODY** reports the incident. The incident must be reported within twelve hours. The incident may be reported directly to DCF or local law enforcement. The number for CT DCF is **860-550-6301** or **1-866-637-4737**.
9. If you are confused or have questions, use this website for more information. This is the DCF website:  
<http://www.ct.gov/dcf/cwp/view.asp?a=2534&Q=521956>.
10. **KEEP CONFIDENCE.**
11. **LISTEN and BELIEVE.**
12. **CHECK IN** with your ministers. They will keep confidentiality but tell you what they are able.
13. If a child does not tell you but behaviors have changed, share your observations with one of your ministers.

14. **If you see something, say something.** That might sound kitschy but it is our responsibility to keep our children safe. You may make the difference.

### III. Listening to the Battered

*And not only that, but we also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope...-Romans 5:3-4 (NRSV).<sup>22</sup>*

*So have no fear of them; for nothing is covered up that will not be uncovered, and nothing secret that will not become known. What I say to you in the dark, tell in the light; and what you hear whispered, proclaim from the housetops. Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul; rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell. Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father. And even the hairs of your head are all counted. So do not be afraid; you are of more value than many sparrows. -Matthew 10:26-31 (NRSV).<sup>23</sup>*

The Bible is full of contradictions. Yet it is our sacred text. We should know what it says and should understand how it is misused. Those that are battered often have Biblical texts use against them. Our Scripture has been used to create misconceptions about who is battered and perhaps used to justify the violence. This section will review those misconceptions, present the types of violence battered (most often women) experience, and how we can create a safe space for them and their families.

#### We Know Who is Being Battered...

1. Myth: Only poor women and women of color are victims of IPV. Therefore, it is easy to tell who is being abused.

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<sup>22</sup> Romans 5:3-4 (New Revised Standard Version).

<sup>23</sup> Matt. 10:26-31 (New Revised Standard Version).

Fact: No, we do not know who is being battered. Abuse knows no boundaries. Abuse cannot be determined by class, race, sexuality, and ethnicity. No one is immune to abuse and an abuser is often not easily identifiable.

2. Myth: She (as most battered are women) “deserved it,” “asked for it,” or “egged it on.”

Fact: There is absolutely NO reason that justifies violence. None. It is unacceptable and illegal.

3. Myth: Alcohol, stress, drug abuse, and mental illness are the only reasons abuse happens.

Fact: Alcohol use, drug use, and stress do not cause domestic violence; they may go along with domestic violence, but they do not cause the violence. Abusers often say they use these excuses for their violence (Michigan Judicial Institute, Domestic Violence Benchbook, 1998, p. 1.6 - 1.7). An abuser chooses to abuse. It is a choice. Also, domestic violence is rarely caused by mental illness, but it is often used as an excuse for domestic violence (Michigan Judicial Institute, Domestic Violence Benchbook, 1998, p. 1 - 8).<sup>24</sup>

4. Myth: The Bible says the man is the head of the household and women should do what they say. If they do not, they deserve to be punished.

Fact: This misuse of Ephesians 5: 22-24 is used to justify abuse. These verses say, “Wives, be subject to your husbands as you are to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife just as Christ is the head of the church, the body of which he is the Savior. Just as the church is subject to Christ, so also wives ought to be, in everything, to their husbands.” Read alone, one may find justification for abuse. However, this is taken out of context. Read within the context of Ephesians 5, we see that this text is actually a text of creating a relationship of love and mutuality. Verse 21 states, “Be subject to one another out of reverence to Christ.” This is laying the framework for a marriage of trust and mutuality. It does not say that one person is more important than the other. Verses 25-28 say, “Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church....In the same way, husbands should love their wives as they

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<sup>24</sup> “Common Myths and Why They Are Wrong,” domesticviolence.org, accessed December 29, 2015, <http://www.domesticviolence.org/common-myths/>.

do their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself” (NRSV).<sup>25</sup> A husband is to treat his spouse as Christ treated the church, with love, respect, and support. They are also to treat their wives’ bodies as they would treat their own bodies. Violence is the antithesis to this text.

5. Myth: Those that are abused should accept their suffering. The Bible says that we are to rejoice in our suffering. Suffering brings us closer to Christ.

Fact: Yes, Christ suffered. Yes, Christ suffered on the cross. However, that was not the end of the story. Our story continues with resurrection and new life. Christ no longer suffers and he does not want us to suffer. Christ wishes a life of love, support, hope, and renewal for us.

Do not let misconceptions cloud your ability to see and understand IPV. While this resource book has some information, there are many other resources out there. If you wish to understand more misconceptions, visit the Faith Trust Institute, at [www.faithtrustinstitute.org](http://www.faithtrustinstitute.org).

### There are How Many Types of Abuse?

As with child abuse, there are many different forms of IPV. Often, these forms are used in a sequence. A batterer may have one form of abuse they regularly employ. They may choose a few different forms. However, abuse often escalates. Abuse of any type is dangerous and should be taken seriously. Additionally, some women will not identify their experience as abuse. The Wheel of Power and Control is a great resource, not only for every congregation member to understand but also to provide to a person experiencing IPV.

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<sup>25</sup> Eph. 5: 21-28 (New Revised Standard Version).



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The Wheel of Power and Control is a great resource to use when speaking to a person about abuse. It may help them put their experiences into words. It will also help them know you take them seriously. **If you use nothing else in the resource book, use this.**

<sup>26</sup> "What Is Abuse?," The National Domestic Violence Hotline, accessed December 29, 2015, <http://www.thehotline.org/is-this-abuse/abuse-defined/>.

## Creating a Safe Space

Intimate Partner Violence is a complex and multi-layer issue. Those abused may respond in curious or unexpected ways. They may also not open up immediately. Kindness, a willingness to listen, a plan of action, and support can go a long way. This section will do multiple things. A. It will assert immediate actions. B. It will give contact information for local assistance. C. It will establish ongoing church programs for continuing support.

### A. Immediate Actions

1. In the bulletin, weekly updates, and monthly updates the following should be published: “If you or someone you know is experiencing abuse, know that you are cared about here. We will help and support you in any way possible. Or, if you feel more comfortable, please call 1-800-799-SAFE. Please know you are not alone.”
2. Post the number for the abuse hotline in the bathroom.
3. If someone approaches you and shares her story, believe her. Believe she is in danger and seek out one of the ministry staff. Only do this with her permission.
4. If she does not give permission to tell a minister, encourage her to call the hotline. Stay with her as she is on the phone.
5. Your safety is as important as her safety. For this reason, it is highly recommended to continue to seek her permission to share with a minister. Support her and ask if she would feel more comfortable having you with her.
6. The minister should help her create a safety plan. A safety plan may include packing a “to-go” bag. This bag should have a change of clothes but if possible, should include important documents like birth certificates. The safety plan should also include where she will go in an emergency.
7. Many women are afraid to leave because of pets. If necessary, the minister should be prepared to help relocate animals for short term.
8. Many women are also afraid to leave because of economic insecurity. The minister should assure her there are discretionary funds that can be used to help her.

9. The minister will want to help her connect with a local shelter. This may feel like a daunting task. Reassure her she will not be alone in the process and her safety is your #1 priority.
- B. Know local agencies. This book is currently specific to West Avon Congregational Church, in Avon, CT. Therefore, the following contacts are local to this congregation.
1. Prudence Crandall Center: [www.prudencecrandall.org](http://www.prudencecrandall.org),  
24- hour hotline **(860) 225-6357**  
**or 1-888-774- 2900**  
594 Burritt St. New Britain, CT
  2. Interval House: [www.intervalhousect.org](http://www.intervalhousect.org)  
24-hour hotline **(860) 527-0550**  
**or (888) 774-2900**  
Location unknown for security reasons
  3. Susan B. Anthony House: [www.sbaproject.org](http://www.sbaproject.org)  
**(860) 489-3798**  
179 Water St. Torrington, CT

C. Ongoing Congregational Possibilities

Thus far, an immediate plan has been established for battered women, as well as contact information for local agencies. However, supporting battered persons should be an ongoing practice of the congregation. There has been extensive research done that has shown the support of a religious community goes far to help women emotionally heal from abuse. Specifically, research done with Korean women who are survivors of domestic violence found that their church communities either helped or hindered their healing process.

This research first found that most women only left their situations when the violence become unbearable or the safety of their children was compromised. Most of these women confided their realization that God would not directly intervene caused them to take action, as well as have a crisis of faith. In essence, for them, God had abandoned them.<sup>27</sup> This is a common theme for many battered women. It feels as though God has abandoned them. Especially when their faith communities may be telling them to stay, endure, or allow the men to be the head of the household. Congregations have a responsibility to subvert this

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<sup>27</sup> Hee Sun Kwon and Carrie Doehrig, "Spiritual Resources Used by Korean Victims of Domestic Violence," *Journal of Pastoral Theology* 14, no. 2 (Fall 2004): 72.

message. Congregations also have a responsibility to remove the shame and sense of failure many of these women experience. How can we do that?

1. Help create a psychological sense of safety.<sup>28</sup> The congregation should do what it can to protect the battered woman. This should include making worship and the church a sanctuary. Let the battered woman tell you what would make her feel safe. Allow the woman to share her story without fear of guilt and shame. Empower her to share her story.
2. Allow her to mourn her loss.<sup>29</sup> The loss of a marriage, the loss of security, the loss of family, the loss of a sense of self are just a few of the types of loss a battered woman may experience. DO NOT tell the woman she is better off when she is attempting to mourn her loss. She needs space to grieve. Regardless of her experience, she will grieve. Support her in her grieving.
3. Help her reconnect with the goodness of life.<sup>30</sup> Encourage her to join a church book group, the gardening group, invite her to tea, or just chat with her. Remind her there is beauty in this world. Tapping into her interests will help you connect with her and find activities that may interest her.
4. Battered women need new connections. They need healthy, new relationships. These are not romantic relationships. Rather, they are relationships within the context of the congregation. These may be through a battered women's support group within the church or just in new interpersonal relationships. The research done with battered Korean women, cites researcher Herman who says, "Recovery is based upon the empowerment of the survivor and the creation of new connections. Recovery can take place only within the context of relationship. It cannot occur in isolation."<sup>31</sup> Battered women are especially vulnerable to isolation. The church should be a place where she feels comfortable and safe enough to make new friends.
5. Create a battered women's support group in connection with one of the local shelters.
6. Create a monthly meal for women in the shelter. This should be an upscale meal, where the women can breathe, laugh, and feel empowered. Additionally, have a program following the meal that either pampers them or teaches them a specific skill.

These are merely a few ways to provide ongoing support to battered women. It is imperative to find ways to implement at least one of these in the life of the church. Additionally, anyone with an imaginative idea is encouraged to share it with the staff. We are to treat others the

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid, 76.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid, 76.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid, 76.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid, 76.

way we wish to be treated. Finding ways to support battered women is essential to sharing God's love with others.

## IV. Holding the Batterer Accountable

*But if anyone has caused pain, he has caused it not to me, but to some extent—not to exaggerate it—to all of you. This punishment by the majority is enough for such a person; so now instead you should forgive and console him, so that he may not be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow. So I urge you to reaffirm your love for him. – 2 Corinthians 2: 5-8 (NRSV).<sup>32</sup>*

We are a Christian community. Our faith in Christ is based on love, forgiveness, and faith. We can point to various texts that inform us to forgive and find ways to reconcile. Thus, we often jump to forgiveness. It can feel uncomfortable to hold someone accountable for his actions. But that is what we must do in an IPV situation. Our #1 priority is the safety of the battered. We are obligated to support her. We do need to remember, however, that the batterer is still a part of our community. So, what obligation do we have to him? This section will define who a batterer is, how we keep them accountable, and when it is appropriate to invite him back to the faith community.

### How Do We Define a Batterer?

A batterer is someone who abuses another person (most often a woman), through physical, economic, intimidation, emotional, blaming, using male privilege, using children, and coercion.<sup>33</sup> Just as you cannot identify a battered woman, you cannot easily identify a batterer. A batterer can be any race, socio-economic status, religion, culture, or age. However, there are some behaviors that may indicate a potential or active batterer.

These behaviors include: jealousy, controlling behavior, quick involvement (in personal and family activities), unrealistic expectations, isolation, blames others for problems, blames other for feelings, hypersensitivity, cruelty to animal or children, “playful” use of force in sex, verbal abuse, rigid sex roles, dual personalities, past battering, threats, breaking objects, and any force during an argument.<sup>34</sup> Obviously, some of these will not be present in day to day interaction. However, if you observe any of these behaviors, you may want to voice concern to one of the ministers. If a woman shares any of these behaviors with you, help her immediately. A person in a new relationship who finds jealousy “cute” may need to be shown the Wheel of Power and Control or the Wheel of Equality.

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<sup>32</sup> 2 Corinthians 2: 5-8 (New Revised Standard Version).

<sup>33</sup> “What Is Abuse?,” The National Domestic Violence Hotline, accessed December 29, 2015, <http://www.thehotline.org/is-this-abuse/abuse-defined/>.

<sup>34</sup> “Abuser Tricks,” New Hope for Women, accessed December 29, 2015, <http://www.newhopeforwomen.org/abuser-tricks>.

This is the Wheel of Equality:



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This wheel may also be shown to batterers but should only be done by the minister. If you suspect abuse, it is not safe to just approach and accuse the possible perpetrator. Furthermore, it may not be a case of abuse and an unfounded accusation could be harmful to the church community. Again, if you have concerns, share them with one of the ministers.

### How to Keep A Batterer Accountable

Historically speaking, religious communities have perpetuated domestic violence. 93% of women still believe religious institutions have a patriarchal structure. Patriarchy may play an explicit or implicit role in a particular faith community. In general, “institutional patriarchy appears to be a pervasive backdrop against which abuse of women by men and/or

<sup>35</sup> “Non-Violence Wheel,” Partnership Against Domestic Violence, accessed December 29, 2015, <http://www.padv.org/documents/Non-Violence%20Wheel.pdf>.

tolerance of it in religious contexts is believed to occur. Indeed, patriarchy arguably impacts not only ecclesiastical structure, but also family structure among religious adherents.”<sup>36</sup> The way in which we hold men accountable for their behavior can change the patriarchal structure that has prevented church from feeling like a safe space for battered women. Here are some basic steps for keeping a batterer accountable.

- A. The minister may continue to meet with the batterer in a safe space. The battered should be informed of these meetings, so that she stays away from the church during these meeting times.
- B. The minister should not share any information with the batterer. Batterers will often attempt to use clergy to obtain details on the women they have battered. The minister should make boundaries clear.
- C. The minister should make it clear that violence is not tolerated, under any circumstances.
- D. The batterer should be asked to find another place to worship on Sundays. It should be made clear the community still cares for them but the church is a sanctuary for the battered. It should be made clear that if the batterer appears at worship or events where the battered is present, he will be gently escorted home. If a restraining order is violated, the church should make it clear a phone call to the police will be made.
- E. Batterers may try to attempt to use scripture to justify their behavior. There is a common understanding that a woman deserves abuse when she defies a traditional religious view of her role in a marriage. Remind them that marriage is about mutuality and respect. God does not approve of violence. God created both men and women in God’s image.
- F. Let the batterer know you care but that you will show your caring through accountability. A batterer may benefit from an intervention program. CT does offer several intervention programs. The following programs may be good for batterers.
  1. Counseling Cooperative: **(860) 292-1212**  
38 Bridge Street, East Windsor, CT 0608
  2. Families in Crisis, Inc: **(203) 573-8656**  
232 North Elm Street Waterbury, CT
  3. Non-Violence Alliance: **(860) 347-8220**  
527 Burnside Avenue East Hartford, CT
- G. The batterer should not be allowed back to worship or functions until the battered gives the okay. If the battered never gives the okay, then the batterer should be guided to a new congregation. This way, the batterer is not abandoned but it is made

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<sup>36</sup> Christopher Burris and Lynne Jackson, “Hate the Sin/love the Sinner, or Love the Hater? Intrinsic Religion and Responses to Partner Abuse,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 38 (1999): 160.

clear that the congregation is committed to keeping the battered feel safe and supported.

- H. Again, make it clear that the batterer made poor choices and his behavior will not be tolerated. Do continue to attempt to connect him to resources.

## Reconciliation

The reconciliation referred to here is not the reconciliation of batterer to battered. The battered should never be forced to forgive or reconcile. Those things should be on her own terms and if she opts to never to either, it should be supported. This is her experience, her feelings, her story. She has already been stripped of many choices and freedom. Give her the opportunity to make her own choices concerning forgiveness and reconciliation. If at any point, it is safe and approved by the battered to invite the batterer back to worship, the congregation can do a ritual to reconcile the congregation with the batterer. The ritual should first pronounce that violence is not a Christian principle and will never be tolerated. It should include something about keeping the batterer accountable. Finally, it should recognize that the batterer is still a child of God and a member of the congregation and the community will support him in his efforts to change his behavior. This ritual can use candles or be covenantal call and response, similar to baptism or communion covenants. The battered should be asked what she is comfortable with. Again, she sets the tone. Nothing should happen without her knowledge or approval. This keeps the space safe and returns some of the power to her.

## V. Advocacy

It is important to understand child abuse and IPV. It is important to understand the warning signs and to be willing to listen and believe. Up to this point, this resource book has focused on plans for specific instances. One way, however, to create a safe church for abuse victims is education and advocacy. Educating the entire congregation prepares them for an “in the moment” response. Furthermore, it empowers them to feel comfortable to take action. Even if no battered person ever comes forward for help, there are many other ways the congregation can take action to eradicate IPV from our society.

In her article, author Aruna Gnanadason asserts, “Violence is functional—to keep systems of domination in place, whether it be in the context of economic globalization, or of social and cultural structures or ecclesial structures. Violence is not a symptom of a dysfunctional society—it is so ‘normal’ that many do not react to it any longer!”<sup>37</sup> Remember the videos of NFL players abusing their partners? People were outraged for a few days and then it felt as though the abuse was viewed as acceptable. We have become complacent to public violence. This does a disservice to those in our midst who have experienced IPV. So, what can we do?

October is Domestic Violence Awareness Month. A worship service that focuses on domestic violence should take place. Volunteers or speakers from the Interval House should

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<sup>37</sup> Aruna Gnanadason, “We Have Spoken so Long O God: When Will We Be Heard?’ Theological Reflections On Overcoming Violence Against Women,” *Theology and Sexuality* 13 (2006): 10.

be invited to speak. Rituals, such as lighting candles for those that have died from IPV, should be included. Those in the congregation that have been in violent relationships should be empowered and encouraged to share their stories. Following worship, care packages can be created for the shelter(s).

Holding a town wide workshop on IPV gives the entire community an opportunity to understand IPV, resources available, and ways to be involved in its eradication. Local law enforcement, social workers, volunteers from shelters, and school guidance counselors should be invited to speak. Be aware that many battered women do not trust the law enforcement, so choose a speaker that has been an advocate for protecting women.

At WACC, Interval House is one of the organizations we financially support. Advocacy requires us to be more involved, perhaps through rides or special meals or other events. Advocacy means meeting the people we are advocating for and hearing/holding their stories.

This is not an exhaustive list. It is only a start. Use your imaginations. Think outside of the box of what has always been done. Consider the gifts you have to offer. Learn all you can. Share all you can. Listen and believe the sacred stories. Remind all women that they, too, are created in the image of God. Remember the words of British theologian Mary Grey, “hospitality, justice and compassion, care, respect and honour all follow from our being created ‘in the image of God’.”<sup>38</sup> This is an important idea to share with women. Violence of any kind is unacceptable to the Body of Christ and betrays the “image of God.” When violence is done to woman, the image of God is violated.<sup>39</sup> Let us do all we can to protect and hold dear the image of God in all persons, particularly those that have been violated in abusive relationships.

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid, 12.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid, 12.

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