

V. Faith-based Communities

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The agenda to end violence against women is enormous, given that we are essentially attempting to turn the tide of centuries of norms, beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors that encourage or support violence against women. Faith-based organizations represent a critical ally in these efforts. Millions of men across the nation participate in faith-based communities whose leaders, often male, typically enjoy significant moral authority and shape in important ways the values and behavior of the men in their congregations.

It is true that many religious traditions have reflected and reinforced patriarchal values that have been at the core of violence against women. However, more recently, many faith-based organizations have begun to accept the challenge of changing those values and promoting positive male involvement to end violence against women. The efforts of some men and women within faith-based organizations can serve to inspire religious leaders to return to the root values of their own traditions, which challenge the powerful and lift up the vulnerable, and which call on religious leaders to be at the forefront of the movement to end violence against women.

Fostering Opportunities For Leadership By Men

In spite of significant changes in the gender make-up of seminaries, the fact remains that the majority of clergy and religious leaders in the U.S. are male, and that many have received no training during their seminary experience about how to address violence against women. In addition, many current leaders think that because they have not been approached about them, domestic violence issues do not exist in their congregations. Some male religious leaders, having noticed the public discussion of violence against women, have asked the question “Why are my people not coming to me with these problems, which surely exist here?” It may be that people are not approaching clergy because they expect to find someone who colludes with perpetrators, blames the victim, and encourages women to return to violent situations. If such responses from clergy are a result of lack of training, awareness, and sensitivity, then there is an opportunity. Training and education can equip them with the awareness and confidence to provide helpful responses when domestic violence issues do arise and to work to prevent further such violence in their congregations and communities.

A History of Ongoing Partnerships

At the Center for the Prevention of Sexual and Domestic Violence (the Center), we have been training and educating religious leaders (clergy and lay) for 25 years. We have focused the training of clergy on increasing their capacities as generalists within their congregation to (1) identify sexual and domestic violence, (2) refer to local specialized resources, and (3) address whatever spiritual concerns may arise for victims or perpetrators. This is an achievable goal, which results in an expanded base of support and additional resources for coordinated community responses. In addition, we have engaged male religious leaders, particularly at the national and regional levels and in

seminaries, to make a personal and professional investment to end violence against women. We have held events in collaboration with Men Stopping Violence (Atlanta) to encourage a new sense of ownership by male leadership of an agenda to end violence against women. These men are allies who can address their male peers and encourage new awareness and action. In their traditional leadership roles in denominations, congregations, and communities, these men can reach many other men. In one workshop, they spent three days together, addressing their own issues regarding violence and then developing collaboration models for work with women to end violence against women.

Faith-based organizations also have extensive interdenominational organizational infrastructures, which can be used to reach large numbers of men. For example, the Presbyterian Church, USA has established domestic violence prevention with men as an important part of the mission of their Men's Ministries. Since the early 1990s, they have developed curricula and trainings for men, such as their Tough Talk manual. In 2000 and 2001, they organized a panel discussion on men's role to end violence against women. This discussion was broadcast via satellite to 3000-5000 men across the United States. The National Council of Churches of Christ, USA, through their Family Life and Human Sexuality office, has made a commitment to educating men about domestic violence and to establishing domestic-violence-free congregations across the country. The responsible fatherhood and coming-of-age programs, part of many faith-based organizations (particularly in the African American community), are also points of possible collaboration in addressing violence against women. And there is currently an effort to train military chaplains to respond more effectively to domestic violence as part of the coordinated community response of the military to violence against women.

The Center is also receiving strong response from some male Jewish religious leaders to address violence against women. After many years of relative silence, they are now exhibiting much greater willingness to acknowledge that rape, battering, incest, and abuse are issues within the Jewish community. This new leadership by male rabbis, often in concert with female rabbis, is encouraging, as is the reaction to the Center's Peaceful Families Project that focuses on the Muslim community in the US. Some imams now speak out against violence against women and respond positively to education programs designed to increase their understanding of the issues.

Even the highly visible faith-based men's movements of the 1990s, like the Promise Keepers, began to discuss violence against women and children as part of their agenda. Though the possibilities for true collaboration were complicated by substantial ideological differences, that these initiatives, including the Million Man March, reached large numbers of men and that violence against women made it to their radar screens, merits further exploration.

Issues for Men

It is still not unusual for male perpetrators and their supporters to utilize religious teachings to justify or excuse their violence towards women. For example, a convicted wife abuser tried to use the First Amendment protection regarding religious beliefs to

support his right to abuse his wife. A California man believed that the teachings of the Roman Catholic Church gave him the right to have sex with his wife whenever he chose, because the marriage vows they exchanged signaled her consent to have sex with him and, once given, this consent was somehow permanent. Whether it is “wives be submissive to your husbands,” *shalom bayit*, or “forgive and forget,” misinterpretations and misuse of scripture or doctrine can deflect accountability for acts of violence against women. Men (and women) who are leaders of faith-based communities must use their authority to challenge these misinterpretations and interrupt attempts by perpetrators to use religion to justify their violence against women.

Faith-based organizations, such as congregations, can be an integral part of perpetrators' accountability systems. In concert with community resources, such as law enforcement and batterers or sex offender programs, informed, active congregations can supply a much-needed structure to support a perpetrator's stopping his violence.

Conclusion

Since many of our social norms are established and reinforced by values and belief systems that come from our religious traditions, we must not ignore faith-based organizations. For many years, many of us within religious communities have been deconstructing the religious belief systems that have promoted the subordination of women and condoned violence against women. We have reconstructed and retrieved stories, teachings, and doctrines that affirm women living lives free from violence. If we are looking for ways to engage more men in the agenda to end violence against women, we must go where men already gather. That certainly means faith-based organizations. In spite of an historic ambivalence by violence prevention movements, we cannot afford to overlook these institutions.

Religious leaders, male and female, have a significant opportunity to collaborate with the wider community in doing what we do best—seek to bring healing and wholeness where there has been damage and violence. We have much to learn from and much to bring to this common effort to end violence against women. But we must pursue this conversation, even against great odds.

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