

HEALING THE --- HEALERS

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Reflection

A Matter of Life and Death:
Domestic Violence and the Healing Power of Faith

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WITH GENEROUS SUPPORT FROM



Lilly Endowment Inc.
A Private Philanthropic Foundation

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A Matter of Life and Death: Domestic Violence and the Healing Power of Faith

Reverend Amy C. Gopp

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I was raised to believe that there are two sacred places in one's life: home and church. Knowing that I could count on the safe haven of my family at home and my community at church instilled in me a sense of security and confidence. Little did I know what a gift it was in those tender, young years of my life to be able to take my safety and security for granted.

If only this were the case for the 1 in 4 women and 1 in 9 men who experience domestic violence in the United States—many of them victims of severe abuse by their intimate partners. If only this were the case for the “1 in 2 female murder victims and 1 in 13 male murder victims [who] are killed by intimate partners.”¹ **Far too many even die.**

Domestic violence is a matter of life and death. Yet it remains a disturbingly “invisible” plight, a taboo topic most avoid discussing or acknowledging, even in faith communities espousing truth, nonviolence, peace, and love. Long considered a private family matter, there is perhaps no more egregious form of betrayal and trauma a person can endure, as the perpetrator is often the one you committed to love and who vowed to love you. Of the overwhelmingly large number of persons suffering from this heinous violence, a majority of them also claim to be people of faith.

According to the Religious Landscape Survey conducted by the Pew Research Center, 53% of adults in the U.S. say religion is very important to them.² Faith is integral—if not foundational—to our identity, culture, and worldview, providing a moral and ethical framework for the living of our lives. At their best, faith and religion also offer a vibrant spiritual support system. But when a victim-survivor of domestic violence seeks help from a faith leader and that leader is not equipped to respond, not only has the home become a danger zone, so has the only other sacred place most of us grew up trusting would protect us.

Healing the Healers explores faith's ability to accompany and empower victim-survivors of domestic violence and intimate partner violence along the journey of restoring hope and wholeness. These honest and courageous conversations call leaders of all faith traditions to open their eyes to the violence inevitably happening in their own congregations so that it is no longer invisible. The personal stories of the faith leaders featured, some of whom are survivors and former perpetrators, narrate how all faith leaders can create safe and brave spaces in which to break the silence of what is a private family matter no more.

¹ National Coalition Against Domestic Violence. (2020). *Domestic violence*. Retrieved from https://assets.speakcdn.com/assets/2497/domestic_violence-2020080709350855.pdf?1596828650457

² Pew Research Center. (n.d.). Importance of religion in one's life. <https://www.pewforum.org/religious-landscape-study/importance-of-religion-in-ones-life/>

When violence of any kind touches a community of faith, it becomes the responsibility of the faith leader and community to confront it, to hold perpetrators accountable, to ensure victims are believed and provided a safe space, and to make the proper referrals to professionals who can most appropriately assist in the recovery process.³ Making the proper referrals is indeed one of the most critical tasks of clergy and other faith leaders in response to domestic violence. This series highlights the importance of faith leaders understanding their specific role not as domestic violence experts themselves, but as those who need to be prepared and aware of their community assets and resources so they can make the right referrals to domestic violence advocates and other professional providers.

Make no mistake: domestic violence can cause physical, sexual, emotional, psychological, and/or spiritual trauma.⁴ Victims of domestic violence experience such horrific infidelity and disruption in the relationship with their abuser(s) that even their connection with the Divine may be questioned. *How in the world could an almighty and ever-loving God have allowed this to happen?* For even the most devout among us, surviving domestic abuse can shake our sense of the sacred, shatter our faith, and bring us to our knees—or worst of all, we succumb to despair, shame, and the further violence of being or feeling silenced.

The *Broken Silence: A Call for Churches to Speak Out* report found that **75% of the 1,000 Protestant clergy surveyed underestimated the level of domestic violence within their own congregations.**⁵ Moreover, spiritual leaders rarely preach or speak out against such violence. If faith is a key cultural competency and healing resource for victims and survivors but clergy do not have an understanding of the complexity of needs and issues surrounding domestic violence—including how to recognize its signs and prevent it from happening—they run the grave risk of being more harmful than helpful. The good news is that 81% of clergy surveyed shared an earnest desire to take appropriate action and offer pastoral care to victim-survivors of violence if they had the training and resources to do so.⁶ Thus, *Healing the Healers*.

If we understand our faith traditions as deep wells of rich resources from which we can draw upon to restore our hope and work toward healing, they have the power to transform us. While certain religious practices and misinterpretations of sacred texts can also serve as a hindrance to healing, obstacles to overcoming the violence we have endured and entrenching us in our shame and silence, the witness of the faith leaders in this series speaks to the power of faith as liberating and life-giving—even in the face of the most intimate and traumatizing forms of violence.⁷

These courageous testimonies and enlightening theological yet practical conversations from multi-faith and intergenerational perspectives offer a model for how faith leaders might most effectively respond to domestic abuse and intimate partner violence.

³ APC Competencies PIC6 Advocate for the persons in one's care and OL2: Establish and maintain professional and interdisciplinary relationships.

⁴ APC Competency ITP2: Incorporate a working knowledge of psychological and sociological disciplines and religious beliefs and practices in the provision of spiritual care.

⁵ Sojourners and IMA World Health. (2014). *Broken silence: A call for churches to speak out*. <https://sojo.net/sites/default/files/Broken%20Silence%20Report.pdf>

⁶ APC Competency PIC5: Use one's professional authority as a spiritual care provider appropriately.

⁷ ACEP Outcome L2.3. demonstrate a range of pastoral skills, including listening/attending, empathic reflection, conflict resolution/transformation, confrontation, crisis management, and appropriate use of religious/spiritual resources

Listening with compassion and believing the victim's story; breaking the silence of shame and stigma; denouncing the violence as sinful and not of God; utilizing tools to help victims locate themselves and understand more fully the behaviors of power and control employed by their perpetrators; helping boys and men transform hegemonic masculinities into healthy expressions and relationships; making the right professional referrals; and serving as a constant and stabilizing force of faithfulness in victims' and survivors' lives are the loving, life-giving responses explored in these heartbreakingly authentic and ultimately hope-filled exchanges. We trust that you will see the significance of faith in the beauty of healing that eventually emerges out of the trauma of broken vows, broken bodies, broken homes, and broken lives in this series.

Sacred traditions have the power to provide new ways of relating, safe and brave spaces in which to heal, and the liberating love of the Divine. Imagine if faith leaders and communities across this country took seriously the all-too-often invisible and silent scourge of domestic violence and committed to preventing it, speaking out against it, effectively responding to it, and accompanying victim-survivors along their healing journeys. We hope against hope that *Healing the Healers* inspires you and your faith community to listen, learn, and act; for in so doing we would not only save lives, we would also usher in the holy healing the world so desperately needs now.