

Emotional Abuse in the Local Church

Is Your Church a Safe Place?

by Mary J. Yerkes

"In the pews of every church, including yours, are women who are victims of abuse," ¹wrote Brenda Branson and Paula Silva in their book, *Pastor's Guide—Dealing with Domestic Violence*.

Silva is co-founder and vice president of FOCUS Ministries, Inc., one of the few Christian ministries devoted to helping victims of domestic violence and educating pastors on abuse. For Christians and non-Christians alike, the nature of domestic abuse is psychological.

"Emotional abuse is always a component of physical, sexual, and verbal abuse, but it can also stand alone," she says. "In all cases of abuse, the perpetrator uses intimidation, humiliation, isolation, and fear to diminish their victim's sense of self and sanity."

Naturally, Christians in emotionally abusive relationships turn to their churches and pastors for help. Some feel loved and accepted unconditionally; others walk away more deeply wounded.

Dr. Tim Clinton, President of the American Association of Christian Counselors, says the impact of emotional abuse can wreak havoc on one's spiritual life.

"It's tough to believe in the fidelity of God, if all you're experiencing is ongoing abuse in your life," he says.

He challenges churches to take time to address these kinds of issues because "it deeply impacts how these women do intimacy with the Father. If our goal is spiritual vitality—spiritual growth and formation—we need to train people in how to do relationships and intimacy better."

Paul Hegstrom goes a step farther, saying that the church often turns a blind eye when confronted by someone who has been emotionally abused.

"It is a sad state of affairs in the church that when a woman has been abused, it seems that the congregation, her friends, and her clergy shy away from dealing with the situation," he writes in *Angry Men and the Women Who Love Them—Breaking the Cycle of Physical and Emotional Abuse*. "She feels forsaken by those she should be able to lean on the most." ²

Forsaken, Hegstrom says, because of an incorrect interpretation of the Scripture.

"Many times in a Church world, submission is held over the heads of women by men who are emotionally manipulative or abusive in order to get their way and maintain power and control."

Do you know someone like this?

Someone like Mark?

He and his wife Janet signed up for a Bible study. Mark instructed Janet not to speak during the Bible study, telling her "women are to keep silent in the churches" (1 Cor. 14:34).

Although Janet had questions, she remained silent in order to "submit" to her husband. Like many abusers, Mark distorted Scripture to manipulate his wife's behavior.

"Ephesians 5:24-28 reminds us that as Christ died for the Church, a man should give his life for his wife," ³writes Hegstrom.

Pastors can help men better understand their biblical role in marriage by providing balanced teaching on Ephesians 5:22-28, offering marriage classes and counseling and modeling a loving relationship with their wives.

Besides helping men understand their role as husbands, Silva says there are ways pastors can show compassion to victims of emotional abuse—and foster a compassionate atmosphere within the church:

- **Validate** her feelings.
- **Listen** to the victim's story.
- **Provide a safe place for women and children in crisis.** Provide wise counsel to victims that will not put her in more danger.
- **Assess her level of safety**, and if she is in danger, take action to help her get to a safe place.
- **Refer the victim** and abuser to a professional Christian counselor who is experienced with domestic violence issues.
- **Educate** yourself, your staff and your congregation on issues of domestic violence.
- **Invite** guest speakers to address the topic.
- **Include** a study on family violence and the prevention of violence in the adult Sunday school curriculum.
- **Display** brochures, newsletters and information about domestic violence where others can easily access them.
- **Offer support and unconditional love.** Connect victims with support groups, prayer partners and provide ongoing emotional and practical support. Prepare to offer support and guidance for years, not days or months, even if the victim is receiving professional counseling.

- **Confront the abuser in accordance with Matthew 18:15-17.** Remove the individual from leadership or fellowship, as appropriate. However, the ultimate goal of confrontation, as emphasized in Galatians 6:1, is repentance and restoration.
- Along with loving confrontation, **pastors should encourage the abuser to join a treatment program.** An organization that can help is Life Skills International, found online at <http://www.lifeskillsintl.org/>. Founded by Paul Hegstrom, a former abuser, the program addresses abuse from a biblical perspective.

Men, women and children caught in the cycle of emotional abuse need practical, emotional and spiritual support. Shouldn't pastors and churches be on the front lines when it comes to addressing emotional abuse and other forms of domestic violence?

Victims want and need support from their churches. Take steps to make your church a safe place, where victims and their abusers can find grace, love, and healing.

¹Brenda Branson and Paula Silva, *Pastor's Guide—Dealing with Domestic Violence*, a publication of FOCUS Ministries, Inc., available online at www.focusministries1.org.

²Paul Hegstrom, Ph.D., *Angry Men and the Women Who Love Them—Breaking the Cycle of Physical and Emotional Abuse*, Missouri: Beacon Hill Press, 1999, 2004, p. 124.

³Ibid, p. 123

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