

Preventing Gender Based Violence

As followers of Jesus, we are called to stand against violence, oppression, and degradation in all its forms. Sometimes, though, we hesitate to act even when we know it's right. A study sent questionnaires to 5,700 pastors about domestic violence in the church – fewer than 10% were returned. The researchers “concluded that pastors lacked interest in or were hostile to the notion of domestic abuse.” Another survey found that “even [pastors] who have additional training in domestic violence tend to blame the victim.”

Therefore, I have assembled the following “toolkit” to help aid us in eliminating gender-based violence. Its purpose is to assist you in proactively working to prevent and resist violence in your preaching, teaching, and general relationships in the parish. It will also offer some advice for recognizing signs of concern in 1:1 counselling, whether of a couple, a perpetrator, or a victim. Finally, with the help of It's Time YEG and the Rev. Canon Chelsy Bouwman, I have compiled a list of social service organizations that are available to assist victims of domestic and intimate partner violence. Our goal is to make sure that when the proverbial feces hit the fan, you have trusted resources at your fingertips, rather than needing to take the time to Google dubiously credible sources.

Thank you for all you are doing, each and every day, to resist patriarchal and gender-based violence, and to support victims of every kind. In so doing, you are truly loving your neighbour as yourself.

Preaching

Both the Old and New Testaments contain stories that have been used to create a culture that supports gender-based violence. It is incumbent upon us, then, as preachers and teachers, to interpret them with care. So often, the protagonist of the story appears to be the one with the power to enact violence, rather than the one being victimized. For example, how many of us learned as children that Bathsheba was a seductress, bathing wantonly naked on her roof, where anyone could see her? How many of us have engaged in the careful study required to realize it was actually David standing on his roof, acting as a peeping Tom – and then abusing the power he held as king to make her an offer she couldn't refuse?

As we all know, it is important when preparing to offer a Scriptural interpretation to consider from whose perspective you are speaking – in this one, David's or Bathsheba's? Who is the hero of the story? Who is to blame? Who gets a chance at redemption? Of course there's not a straight line from a Christian hearing the story of David and Bathsheba to perpetrating gender-based violence. But it is important for our teaching to disrupt the expected narrative, as Jesus's did, and to remind marginalized and powerful alike that God casts down the mighty and exalts the humble and meek.

The following stories in Scripture require particular care and attention in interpretation, in order to disrupt the dominant narrative that those with power are chosen by God and whatever behaviour they choose to practice is acceptable to God. They also offer a useful way in to explicitly preaching against gender-based violence in a way that affirms those who have been victimized and condemns perpetrators. I offer the following reflections for your consideration:

- The Story of Esther (Esther, entire)
 - When preaching the story of Esther, pay attention to the context. King Artaxerxes has dismissed Queen Vashti because she refused to obey what was, ultimately, a drunken command. He does so specifically because his counselors fear other wives will take any leniency as license to disobey their own husbands' orders. How can your interpretation disrupt the assumption that wives ought to obey their husbands' drunken nonsense?

- Esther is often commended for using her royal privilege to advocate for her people. Despite the dignity of her position, she is constrained. She knows that approaching her husband without his summons is dangerous. How can your interpretation lift up her bravery and acknowledge the challenge she faced?
- The Story of Hosea (Hosea, entire)
 - God, famously, orders the prophet Hosea to marry a “wife of whoredom.” This provides God with an extended allegory for God’s disobedient, disloyal, adulterous, and idolatrous people, Israel. It assumes that the husband (Hosea, God) has the right to punish the adulterous wife – by stripping her naked, by exiling her into the wilderness. How can your interpretation make clear that no party in a marriage has the right to do this to their partner, no matter what they have done?
- David and Bathsheba (2 Samuel 11)
 - As previously discussed, David is the one standing on his palace roof, acting as a peeping Tom toward a woman over whom he held absolute power, as she engaged in a religious purity ritual. How can your interpretation overturn the notion that Bathsheba was behaving seductively? How can you emphasize that this was not a consensual adulterous relationship, but one that involves coercion and power imbalance? How can you lift up Bathsheba’s perspective on the events at hand – the murder of her husband, and her subsequent marriage to his murderer?
 - In particular, I invite you to consider Bathsheba’s perspective on the death of the child created by her relationship with David. The author of 2 Samuel gives us David’s perspective – what might hers be? How would she feel about God punishing her rapist husband by killing her child?
- Sodom & Gomorrah (Genesis 19) and the Levite’s concubine (Judges 19)
 - Much ink has been spilled regarding the crowd in Sodom seeking to have their way with the male(?) angels who have come to visit Lot. Rather less has been written about Lot’s proposed solution that he offer his virgin daughters to the mob. Indeed, the story is deliberately echoed in Judges 19, when the Levite (a religious authority) acts upon this plan and submits his concubine to a rapacious crowd. We might assume our listeners know that offering up a member of your family to gang rape is wrong – but how can your interpretation highlight condemnation of this action, rather than passing blame onto the LGBT community?
- The list goes on
 - Samson & Delilah (Judges 16) – This story has often highlighted the inherent untrustworthiness of women. How can your interpretation disrupt that narrative?
 - Abraham (Genesis 12) and Isaac (Genesis 27) pimp their wives out to various kings, yet they are still God’s chosen family through which God will bless all the nations. How can your interpretation acknowledge this paradox?
 - Jesus condemns divorce quite strongly, except in cases of adultery. Many people in abusive relationships have felt pressured to stay because of this teaching. How can your interpretation recognize that the abuser is the one who has broken the marriage vows, not the person seeking to leave?
 - Preaching and teaching about the household codes of Ephesians 5 and Colossians 3 often focuses on “wives obey your husbands” and not “husbands, love your wives as Christ loved the Church and gave Himself up for her.” How can your interpretation be lifegiving for husbands

and wives alike? For households with same-gender partners? How can it make clear that violence is not an appropriate response to any “disobedience” on the part of a partner?

Not all of these texts appear in the Sunday lectionary. However, many of us are now offering daily worship online – how will we respond when we encounter these stories? You may also consider affirmatively scheduling to preach them (with Bishop Jane’s permission, of course) in order to address the topic head on. In my experience, many more people than we might wish assume that the patriarchal interpretation is one we hold, and need to hear a deliberate deconstruction of the hermeneutic which has oppressed them.

When engaging Scriptural texts, try asking yourself:

- Who has power in this text, and what does the passage say about power and its uses?
- What are the implications of my interpretation for vulnerable people, particular those who have been historically oppressed?
- How would someone experiencing domestic or intimate partner violence encounter this text? What would they hear in my sermon?
- What would Jesus have to say to such a person? How is that captured by my interpretation of the text?

What other questions could you ask yourself to ensure that your sermons work to end gender-based violence, rather than passively allow it to continue?

Pastoral Counseling

Counseling women, specifically, requires care and attention to their position in the “family system” of our society, and the narratives that society tells about them, and teaches them to tell themselves. Many of the following insights are drawn from the excellent book *Counseling Women: A Narrative, Pastoral Approach* by Christie Cozad-Neuger.

The most important action a pastoral counselor can take is to listen, as we know. When women and others disclose domestic or intimate partner violence, gender-based harassment in the workplace, or similar abuses, it is important to affirm and believe them. Even if the system does not believe them (for example, if the evidence does not prove guilt beyond a reasonable doubt at trial), the fact that their pastor believed them will still matter. By choosing to believe their disclosure, we are communicating that the person who has disclosed abuse is a person of worth and value.

As Christians, we are able to follow the example of Jesus and his parables in offering a “counternarrative” to the dominant one. In parables, Jesus often reframes a story from ordinary life as being about the kingdom of heaven. In a similar way, we can take the ordinary lives of those who have disclosed abuse, and use a counter narrative to disclose a hidden truth: one the person disclosing abuse knows but has not confronted. These counternarratives also allow us to reframe the person’s story to allow them to consider possibilities they had previously not considered open to them.

It is important, however, that we allow the individual to choose what happens next. Many marginalized persons in society, including women, feel that their choices are constrained. If they leave an abusive partner, there may be consequences to that action they are not ready to deal with. Cozad-Neuger explicitly cautions us against making leaving the battering relationship a treatment goal. Rather, the goal must be to live in a violence-free environment. I have found this hard in the past – there is such a thing as right and wrong, and leaving a relationship characterized by abuse seems like a no-brainer. However, the individual may have very good reasons for choosing to stay. Ultimately, the abuser seeks to take away control and agency from the victim, regardless of gender, and it is any counselor’s responsibility to restore that God-given agency and conscience to the individual, rather than seeking to control and constrain their decisions further.

At this time, I would like to offer a word about forgiveness. Many Christians who have been abused have also been pressured to forgive their abuser. Theologically, we know that forgiveness is crucial, no matter how horrible the crime, and no matter how many times the offense has been committed. But forgiveness is the end of the process, not the beginning. The onus of the work lies with the abuser, not the person who has been abused. When we look at Scripture, all the examples Jesus gives of forgiveness demonstrate the person with the most power in the situation (the king holding the debt, Jesus and the woman washing his feet) offering mercy to the person with less power, not the oppressed forgiving their oppressor. This is not a time to offer cheap grace. Repentance and amendment of life are called for if forgiveness is to one day be offered. When we bring up forgiveness in our first interaction with someone experiencing domestic abuse, we often lose credibility with them – credibility we will need if we are to continue to support them on this journey.

In a similar way, we must pay close attention to interactions between the parties when they attend pastoral counseling together. Many experienced therapists have noted that couples' counseling is less effective for relationships characterized by abuse. The abuser is often able to hide or justify their behaviour in front of a third-party, and cast doubt on the victim's interpretation of events. You may wish to meet with each partner separately if you suspect abuse may be present in the relationship.

Finally, it is crucial to recognize that reconciliation may not be possible in this relationship this side of heaven. While Jesus has the power to reconcile all things to Himself, this is eschatologically true, and not always manifest in our sinful and broken world. Many partners who come to us may feel obligated to stay in the relationship, no matter the cost, because of their faith. Allowing them to grieve its breaking, while also supporting the end of the relationship when that is the individual's chosen action, can be incredibly liberating.

- Listening is *even more* crucial in counseling related to gender-based violence and domestic abuse.
- Start from a presumption of belief.
- Respect and honour the agency of the individual disclosing abuse as they choose what happens next.
- Offer a counternarrative to the story of this person's ordinary life that allows them to explore options they previously have not considered.
- Don't rush to counsel forgiveness. Let the process take the time it takes, and trust that in the fullness of time the crucified Christ will reconcile all things to Himself.

What other advice would you give yourself or your clergy colleagues when counseling those in a relationship characterized by abuse?

Resources

You're probably familiar with many of these, but here's a spot to keep them all handy when you need to refer. Grateful to It's Time YEG and the Rev. Canon Chelsy Bouwman for assistance collecting these resources.

In Edmonton:

- Sexual Assault Centre of Edmonton (SACE) 24 Hour Sexual Assault Information Line: 780-423-4121
- Momentum Walk-In Counselling (sliding-scale payment structure): 780-757-0900
- Pride Centre: 780-488-3234
- TODAY Family Violence Help Centre: 780-455-6880 (after hours: 780-482-4357)

In Drayton Valley:

- Warming Hearts: 780-898-6718
- Community Mat Program emergency shelter for those without a safe place to sleep: 4401 50 Ave

In Cold Lake:

- Dragonfly Counselling & Support Centre: 780-812-3174 (text: 780-207-7535)
- Dr. Margaret Savage Crisis Centre: 780-594-3353

Across Alberta:

- Alberta's One Line (toll-free phone, text, and chat): 1-866-403-8000
- Alberta Council of Women's Shelters: 1-866-331-3933 (press 1 to find a shelter near you)

Learn More

https://www.edmonton.ca/city_government/initiatives_innovation/gender-based-violence-and-sexual-assault-prevention.aspx/

<https://itstimeyeg.ca/what-were-doing/building-knowledge-information/>

Cozad-Neuger, Christie. *Counseling Women: A Narrative, Pastoral Approach*. Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 2001.

16 Days of Activism

This year, join faith leaders from all across Edmonton as we unite to act to eliminate gender-based violence. Video interviews with faith leaders will be released daily from November 25-December 10 on the diocesan website.

Feel free to share these videos with your congregations, and invite those who would like to join our interfaith team as we act against gender-based violence to get in touch: rector@goodshepanglican.org.