

## Protagonist Corner

Domestic Violence

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I'm more accustomed to discussing with her the latest recipe for banana and raspberry salad or possible methods for crafting tissue-paper butterflies for her kindergarten-age church school class; but at the moment the petite, blond, usually vivacious mother of two, her eyes red-rimmed, faces me with other thoughts crowding her mind. She nervously twists a straggling lock of hair and whispers in a choked voice, "I don't know what I'm going to do." Amid occasional silences calculated to regain her composure and agitated glances about the room, her story unfolds — an account of increasingly difficult communication with her up-and-coming young lawyer husband; her struggles to maintain a nurturing home for her two young sons, ages seven and three; the rise in her husband's drinking, especially on the weekends; the floundering of the family to remain afloat financially in a sea of massive house and car payments and other expenses that never seem to quit, from the unexpected visit to the pediatrician for the three-year-old's ear infection to new Batman tennis shoes for the seven-year-old. She talks; I mostly listen. And then something — perhaps a catch in her voice, perhaps the desperate, far-away look in her eyes — alerts me, and I inquire, as gently as I can, "Does he hit you?" A wave of hurt and rage and desperation, and yes, maybe even relief that someone has discovered the terrible secret that had been hidden for so long, sweeps across my friend's face. "Yes, how in the world did you know? And what am I going to do?" she searchingly queries.

Domestic violence, a social problem that is only now being exposed to public awareness, is widespread among all races and economic classes. It is defined as *battering* between spouses and includes psychological and physical abuse which is coercive and repetitive.<sup>1</sup> The incidence of battering is vast. An occurrence of battering is reported every minute in the United States. This is three times higher than the occurrence of rape and probably represents less than ten percent of actual incidents. Studies by researchers indicate the likelihood that one of every two women will experience some form of violence in a relationship with a spouse or lover at some point in her life and that sixty percent of couples will experience some degree of physical violence at some point in their lives.<sup>2</sup>

Throughout the history of the Christian church, there has existed commitment on the part of the faithful to "preach good news to the poor, proclaim liberty to the captives, recover sight to the blind, set free the oppressed . . ." (Luke 4:18-19). But in the case of domestic violence, the church has yoked itself with other elements of our contemporary culture in remaining ignorant of the problem's scope or keeping silent when the occasional publicized instance came to light. In fact, the church has often unwittingly encouraged the preva-

lence of domestic violence through its loud and constant affirmation of the "sacredness" of the marriage vow and the often conscious, sometimes unconscious, assertion of the hierarchical model of marriage and family in which the husband and father maintains ultimate control over wife and children as the "spiritual" head of the household. Ministers have acquiesced to the church's unspoken position by failing to inquire about the possibility of battering situations when faced with counseling couples or individuals in the throes of marital distress or by encouraging couples to maintain a relationship despite the lack of mutuality and caring. Middle-class women most often cache the secret of their battering because they feel responsible for their own suffering and because of economic dependence upon the husband, admitting their pain only when the situation becomes unbearable.

It is imperative that the church become involved in this critical area of human need if it is serious about its concern for human justice. The involvement of the church in the issue of domestic violence can be expressed on several levels. First of all, those individuals in the midst of situations of domestic violence are in need of the care of the church. As a part of their experience, they are dealing with questions of their own self-worth and their own faith. They are doubting and suffering, asking "I promised to love, honor, and cherish? What does God want me to do now?" Familiarity with already existing community resources is an aid in helping such individuals. In many cases, these helpers in the secular community are somewhat antagonistic toward the intrusion of members of the religious community. Many have never been made aware of the concerns of those motivated by religious convictions; but usually once they are convinced of genuine commitment, they will be open to working to integrate services in the best interest of the victims.

In addition, the church is obligated to be vociferous in its witness to the larger culture regarding the problem of domestic violence. This is especially true in these days of the "pro-family" outcries of the Moral Majority who support such outrageous legislation as the Family Protection Act which would forbid any intrusion by the state into abusive family situations. The Domestic Violence Act which would have provided additional funding for shelters for battered women has already fallen victim to a budget-cut-conscious Congress, and already existing shelters are struggling to maintain programs in the face of decreasing public funding. Local mission giving might well be allocated for the support or establishment of programs designed to alleviate the perpetuation of family violence.

The pain of my attractive young friend is not an isolated pain; it is repeated every day in your community and in mine, in your congregation and in mine. For Christians who affirm justice for all God's children, active involvement in the issue of domestic violence is an urgent demand which cannot go unheeded.

<sup>1</sup>Marie Fortune, "Some Reflections About the Incidence and Meaning of Rape/Sexual Violence," in *A Time to Speak*, published by The Council on Women and the Church, UPCUSA.

<sup>2</sup>"Myths and Facts About Rape and Battering," pamphlet published by Council on Women and the Church, UPCUSA.