

# Domestic Violence:

## What Churches Can Do



*Study guide for  
facilitators*

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# Recommendations for the Use of this DVD Program

This program presents basic information on domestic violence and is intended for use in Christian education for congregations.

1. Arrange for a skilled facilitator to conduct the program. It is helpful to involve a community specialist on domestic violence in planning and implementing the session.
2. Be certain that the facilitator is thoroughly familiar with the contents of this study guide prior to presentation of the program.
3. Be aware that this topic may elicit strong emotions from participants who are victims or survivors of domestic violence. Be sure that you have referral resources on hand, and consider how you can create a safe atmosphere for discussion.
6. Order sufficient copies of the take-home brochure for viewers. They can be ordered in bulk or camera-ready copy may be purchased from FaithTrust Institute, toll free: 877-860-2255, [www.faithtrustinstitute.org](http://www.faithtrustinstitute.org).

# Domestic Violence:

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## What Churches Can Do

Study Guide by Rev. Thelma Burgonio-Watson

The study guide and brochure for viewers were developed to accompany the DVD, *Domestic Violence: What Churches Can Do* (an edited version of *Broken Vows*, for use in Christian education), produced in 2002 by FaithTrust Institute, formerly the Center for the Prevention of Sexual and Domestic Violence. Additional copies of the DVD, study guide or audience brochure may be obtained by calling or writing the publisher:



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sexual & domestic violence

Order toll free: 877-860-2255  
[orders@faithtrustinstitute.org](mailto:orders@faithtrustinstitute.org)  
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# Domestic Violence: What Churches Can Do

This one-hour study session using a condensed version of the DVD, *Broken Vows*, presents basic consciousness-raising on the issue of domestic violence. It provides concrete ideas about how congregations can become involved, and can offer a safe space for battered women in their church to come forward.

This program will *not* equip clergy or congregations with the expertise to assist battered women with the resources they urgently need. It is critical, when dealing with this issue, for clergy and laity to be aware of local community service agencies and to understand the importance of referring battered women and batterers to appropriate community service providers who are the experts in the field.

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## Program Overview

This is a one-hour study session intended for Christian congregations, laity, religious leaders and anyone interested in increasing awareness about domestic violence. It utilizes the 20-minute educational DVD, *Domestic Violence: What Churches Can Do*, an edited version of the DVD, *Broken Vows: Religious Perspectives on Domestic Violence*.

Facilitators may also choose to implement this curriculum in a longer format, such as an adult education evening or as a breakout session at a church retreat. While the topic can be covered in one hour, this study guide includes sufficient material for a 90-minute or two-hour session. It is suggested that those using a longer format allow more time for the group to consider possible responses to domestic violence in their faith and local communities. Questions 4, 5, and 6 in the Group Discussion portion of this guide may assist facilitators in planning for this conversation.

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# Suggestions to the Facilitator

## Preparation Checklist

Before showing the DVD, use the following checklist to determine whether sufficient preparation has been made:

- You as facilitator have viewed the DVD at least once.
- The study guide and discussion questions are familiar to you. You have carefully reviewed the section of this study guide entitled, “Background Information: Domestic Violence as a Religious Issue.”
- You have reviewed this material with the pastor at your church and she/he is aware that the program is being presented.
- Community resources (shelters, hotlines, crisis centers, treatment programs) have been researched and a list prepared for participants.
- An adequate number of hand-outs/brochures has been ordered and received. (Additional copies of the Domestic Violence Awareness brochure may be ordered in bulk, or camera-ready copy may be purchased from FaithTrust Institute toll free: 877-860-2255 (USA only) or 206-634-1903 (outside USA), or order online at [www.faithtrustinstitute.org](http://www.faithtrustinstitute.org).)
- Church position statements on domestic violence, if available, have been gathered.
- If more than 30 people are expected, two DVD monitors have been reserved.
- A resource table has been arranged to display information.
- It is understood that the participants may include victims and survivors of domestic violence. The facilitator may acknowledge this at the beginning of the session and let the group know that if anyone becomes uncomfortable at any time during the showing of the DVD or any time during the session, they are welcome to go to a quiet room apart from the group to speak with a counselor.
- A quiet room has been prepared and a trained counselor has been identified and is available to talk with victims and survivors.
- Denial or resistance from participants is a very real possibility, and consideration has been given to responding to such occurrences and creating a safe atmosphere for discussion.



## Facilitating Discussion Following the DVD

- Leave the lights out for the duration of the DVD (through the credits). This will allow members of the audience extra time to compose themselves if they were upset by the content.
- Use the suggested discussion questions to facilitate the discussion.
- Remember you have only half an hour to complete the session.
- If you need more time, you may suggest a second session to the group.

## Materials Needed

- A copy of the DVD, *Domestic Violence: What Churches Can Do*
- A DVD/TV Monitor
- Newsprint or Chalkboard
- Copies of Psalm 55: 4-8, 12-14, 20-21 or Bibles
- If you decide to read the Psalm in unison, prepare copies for the class.



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## Background Information:

# Domestic Violence as a Religious Issue

Clergy are sometimes afraid to acknowledge domestic violence for fear of being involved in situations that are beyond their capabilities, or for fear of raising issues that the community just doesn't want to hear. An illusion is often created that all is well in the church community. People want to come to their place of worship and leave feeling good, believing that all is well with their family and their neighbor's family.

Churches can be resources or roadblocks to those who are victims or perpetrators of battering in their congregations. Silence, lack of skills, and unwillingness to recognize the suffering of congregants create dead ends for those seeking help. Sometimes these signals force congregants to choose between the congregation and its inadequate or counter-productive advice, and their survival. Religious communities must make it known that there is nothing in Christian teachings which justifies abuse of another person, and, although nowhere in the scriptures does God promise we will not suffer, God does promise to be with us when we suffer. The church must be the extension of God's presence to those who are experiencing abuse.

In addition to responding to individual crises, congregations have the responsibility to shape community norms for family life that would preclude control, coercion and violence.

### Suffering

Often a religious woman suffering from domestic violence takes the blame upon herself to explain her situation: God is a stern judge and she is being punished for a past sin. Or perhaps she feels it is God's will that she suffer, and she must bear up to prove herself worthy.

This stern, harsh, even cruel image of God runs counter to the kind, merciful and loving God found in the Bible. The distinction between voluntary and involuntary suffering is useful in these instances. An example is that Martin Luther King, Jr., chose to suffer to change unjust, racist laws. Although the abuse he experienced was not justifiable, he chose voluntary suffering as a means to an end.

When a person is beaten, raped, or abused, especially in an intimate relationship, this suffering is not chosen, and it serves no good end. It is understandable for these victims to conclude that God has abandoned them, and it is during these times they need the reinforcement of God's word that God is present and does not want them to suffer (Psalms 22 and 55; Romans 8:38-39 NRSV).

## Partnership Roles and Marriage

Christian teaching about marriage has traditionally focused on Paul's letters to the Ephesians, Corinthians, and Colossians. Misinterpretations of, or misplaced emphasis on, these texts infer that a wife must submit to her husband's control. This is often construed to mean that the husband/father is the absolute head of the household, and the family must obey him without question. This understanding has been extended to justify abuse. Some clergy and counselors may rationalize domestic violence as a private matter.

The actual scriptural references reveal a different intent. Ephesians 5:21 (NRSV) says *"Be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ."* *"Wives accommodate to your husbands, as to the Lord."* (Ephesians 5:22) *"Husbands, love your wives even as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself for it."* (Ephesians 5:25) These examples clearly indicate that both husbands and wives are to be mutually subject to one another. *"Accommodate"* implies sensitivity, flexibility, and responsiveness, not blind obedience.

Passages from Ephesians 5:21-29 are commonly used as instruction for marriage, and contemporary interpretation often focuses only on the wives and sometimes misuses these passages to justify the abuse of wives by their husbands. In actuality, nine of these verses are directed toward the husband's responsibilities in marriage; only three refer to the wife's responsibilities; one refers to both. While spouse abuse may occur in Christian marriages, it certainly cannot be made legitimate by scripture.

Genesis 3:16, "*Your desire shall be for your husband and he shall rule over you*" has been clarified by Pope John Paul II, who states that it does not mean that men are created to rule over women. He goes on to say that it is a sinful situation when a woman is "*the object of domination and male possession,*" and that the "*ruling over*" is a result of "*sin and broken relationships between God and humanity and among people.*"

The covenant of marriage is intended to be a life-long commitment, and has the following elements: it is made in full knowledge of the relationship; it involves a mutual giving of self to the other; it is assumed to be lasting; it values mutual respect and equality between the two persons.

A marriage vow can be violated by one or both partners. It is commonly accepted in Christian traditions that adultery violates the marriage covenant. Likewise, violence or abuse in a marriage violates the covenant and fractures a relationship. In both cases, the trust which was assumed between partners is shattered. In violent homes, divorce is not breaking up families; violence and abuse are breaking up families. In many cases, divorce or annulment may be a necessary intervention to generate healing and new life from a devastating and potentially deadly situation.

## Forgiveness

Many Christians feel that whenever one person assaults another, the victim should quickly forgive the abuser. Some quote King Lear (“Forgive and forget.”) as if it were scripture. In fact, quick forgiveness is not helpful for anyone involved. No battered woman should be encouraged to forgive her abuser until the abuse has stopped and until he has made efforts to repair the damage which he did to the relationship and to her and her children. If at that point she feels that she can forgive, this means that she can let go of the pain and move on in her life. Forgiveness does not necessarily mean that she returns to the relationship nor that she renews her trust in her former partner. (For further discussion, see *Keeping the Faith* by Rev. Marie M. Fortune, 1 (877) 860-2255, USA only; [www.faithtrustinstitute.org](http://www.faithtrustinstitute.org).)

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## Presenting the Session: 60 Minutes, Total Presentation

INTRODUCTION. . . . .	12 minutes
DVD PRESENTATION . . . . .	20 minutes
GROUP DISCUSSION . . . . .	25 minutes
CLOSING PRAYER . . . . .	3 minutes

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### Introduction: 12 minutes

1. Open the study session by introducing yourself as the facilitator and ask participants to introduce themselves briefly.
2. Read in unison from Psalm 55:4-8, 12-14, 20-21.  
Facilitator: “Let us read these words of the Psalmist and imagine that she is a woman caught in an abusive relationship”:

My heart is in anguish within me  
the terrors of death have fallen upon me.  
Fear and trembling come upon me,  
And horror overwhelms me.  
And I say, “Oh that I had wings like a dove!  
I would fly away and be at rest:, truly, I would flee far away;  
I would lodge in the wilderness;  
I would hurry to find a shelter for myself  
From the raging wind and tempest.”  
It is not enemies who taunt me - I could bear that;  
It is not adversaries who deal insolently with me-  
I could hide from them.

But it is you, my equal, my companion, my  
familiar friend,  
With whom I kept pleasant company;  
We walked in the house of God with the throng.  
My companion laid hands on a friend  
And violated a covenant with me  
With speech smoother than butter,  
But with a heart set on war;  
With words that were softer than oil,  
But in fact were drawn swords.”

Psalm 55:4-8; 12-14; 20-21 (NRSV)

### 3. Opening Prayer:

Loving God, we gather today in your presence,  
open our hearts and minds to a clearer  
understanding of the violence in our lives, in our  
families, our churches and our communities. May  
we experience your presence among us as the God of  
peace, as healer, as comforter and as One who  
desires and calls your church to be a sanctuary for  
those fleeing from violence in their lives. Show us  
the path to be a caring church and fill us with your  
healing power. In Jesus Christ's name, we pray. Amen.

### 4. Introduce the session's objectives:

1. To educate our congregation about the basic dynamics of domestic violence.
2. To motivate our congregation to be supportive of battered women and to call batterers to account.
3. To inspire our congregation to work with secular communities to bring spiritual support and physical safety to women experiencing domestic violence.
4. To challenge our congregation to work on prevention of domestic violence.



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## DVD Presentation: 20 minutes

Show the DVD, *Domestic Violence: What Churches Can Do*.

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## Group Discussion: 25 minutes

Discuss the group's response to the DVD. Listed below are some sample questions that may be helpful, but it is also important to take cues from the participants' reactions and to let the group discussion develop in a natural manner.

1. What are the words or phrases from the DVD that come to mind when you hear the terms domestic violence or spouse abuse?

*(domestic violence occurs in 28% of marriages; 95% of the victims are women; physical assaults, sexual assaults, psychological assaults, attacks against property and pets; etc.)*

2. What are the violent or abusive behaviors that describe domestic violence?

*(punching, pushing, shoving, hitting with fist, bat, etc., kicking; sexual acts which are unwanted; forced financial dependence; isolation from family and/or friends)*

3. How can a woman's religious beliefs serve as a roadblock to dealing with domestic violence?

*There is nothing in Christian teachings that can rightly be used to justify abuse. However, there are teachings which can be misused and distorted to suggest that domestic violence may be acceptable or even God's will. Misinterpretations of scripture promoting a wife's unquestioning obedience to her husband in all situations may be used to justify abuse or to mandate an abused woman to submit to her husband's control.*

*The passages from Ephesians actually reveal a different intent. Ephesians 5:21 (NRSV) says, "Be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ."*

*“Wives accommodate to your husbands, as to the Lord.” (Ephesians 5:22)  
“Husbands, love your wives even as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself for it.” (Ephesians 5:25) These examples clearly indicate that both husbands and wives are to be mutually subject to one another. “Accommodate” implies sensitivity, flexibility and responsiveness, not blind obedience.*

*Often a religious woman who is a victim of domestic violence takes the blame upon herself, perhaps believing it is God’s will that she suffer. However, an image of God as stern or harsh runs counter to the kind, merciful and loving God found in the Bible.*

4. How can a woman’s religious beliefs serve as a resource in dealing with domestic violence?

*A woman’s faith and religious beliefs can be used as a resource to assure her that the abuse is not her fault, that she is not alone, and that God will be with her on her journey to find safety and healing.*

5. How can our congregation be a safe place to disclose that one is a victim of domestic violence?

- *Information about domestic violence can be made available in safe locations. i.e. in restrooms.*
- *Sermons can include condemning abuse in the home and in intimate relationships.*
- *Sermons can proclaim that there is nothing in Christian teaching which can be rightly used to justify abuse.*
- *Victims and survivors of domestic violence can be included in congregational prayers.*
- *Abuse can be discussed in pre-marital counseling.*
- *Dating violence can be discussed in the youth group, and curricula addressing healthy teen relationships can be included in youth group programming.*
- *Congregation can develop a policy statement on domestic violence that includes safety mechanisms for women choosing to leave their abusive partners.*

6. What can our congregation do to support women who disclose abuse?

- *Listen to the women and believe them.*
- *Tell them that the abuse is not their fault, and is not God's will for them.*
- *Tell them they are not alone and that help is available.*
- *Let them know that without intervention, abuse often escalates in frequency and severity over time.*
- *Seek expert assistance from battered women's programs in our community.*
- *Refer them only to specialized domestic violence counseling programs, not to couples counseling.*
- *Apply the following goals for intervention:*
  - a. *Safety for the victim and her children. Help her find a shelter, a safe home or advocacy resources to offer protection to her and her children. Refer only to specialized domestic violence counseling programs, not to couples counseling.*
  - b. *Hold the abuser accountable. Support the abuser in seeking specialized batterers' counseling to help change his behavior.*
  - c. *Restore relationship, if possible, after the first two steps above have taken place. If reconciliation is not possible, help mourn the loss of the relationship.*

7. If both the victim and the abuser are members of the congregation, how can we be supportive and helpful to all members of the family?

*Safety for the victim and her children has to be addressed first. After that has been ensured, ongoing support can best be accomplished by helping the victim find appropriate community resources and providing the support of her faith community as she starts the journey of healing and decision-making for the future.*

*The most helpful support that the congregation can offer to the abuser is to hold him accountable, to support him in taking responsibility for his behavior and recognizing that he has a problem, and to stand by him as he seeks treatment from a specialized batterers' counseling program.*

8. Now that we have had the experience of talking about domestic violence in our congregation, where should we go from here?

*The following is a list of steps congregations can take to get more involved in this issue:*

- *Form a committee to address domestic violence issues.*
- *Encourage clergy to speak out against domestic violence from the pulpit.*
- *Invite staff from local domestic violence programs to make educational presentations.*
- *Designate a day or month for educating and activating the congregation.*
- *Offer pre-marriage counseling dealing with equality, conflict, violence and control.*
- *Use available curricula for youth which encourage the values of gender equality and nonviolent conflict resolution.*
- *Offer meeting space in the church to the local domestic violence program.*
- *Contribute financial support to local domestic violence programs.*
- *Serve as a volunteer at local domestic violence programs.*
- *Gather list of resources on this issue from your denomination.*
- *Prepare future educational presentations using the print and media resources listed below:*
  - *The Domestic Violence Awareness Brochure, “What Every Congregation Needs to Know About Domestic Violence.” Available in English, Chinese, Laotian, Spanish, Korean and Vietnamese.*
  - *The book, “Keeping the Faith, Guidance for Christian Women Facing Abuse,” by Rev. Marie M. Fortune. Available in English, Spanish and Korean.*
  - *The DVD, “Wings Like a Dove: Healing for the Abused Christian Woman.”*
  - *The curriculum and DVD series, “Love – All That and More,” to teach healthy relationship skills to teens and young adults.*

- *All of the resources listed above are available from FaithTrust Institute in Seattle, WA: Toll free: 877-860-2255 (USA only), [www.faithtrustinstitute.org](http://www.faithtrustinstitute.org)*
9. Offer the group phone numbers for assistance and advocacy for victims.

*24-hour toll-free National Domestic Violence Hotline:*

*1-800-799-SAFE*

*1-800-787-3224 (TDD)*

*Provide a local hotline number*

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## Closing Prayer: 3 minutes

Close with the suggested prayer or a group-shared prayer. Observe silence for a few moments and invite the group to reflect on new insights. Invite them to remember and name in silence those they know who have suffered or are suffering from domestic violence.

Closing prayer:

God of compassion: give us openness and compassion for those who suffer domestic violence. May our church be a safe place where women can name the truth of the violence in their lives and be heard with solidarity and compassion. May it be a place where perpetrators of abuse are called to account. May it be a place where all can find justice and healing. We offer our lives to the work of ending violence in all its forms. This is our prayer in the name of Jesus Christ who knows the pain of violence. Amen.

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# Award-Winning DVDs Available from FaithTrust Institute

To order these titles, call FaithTrust Institute at 877-860-2255 (toll free).  
[www.faithtrustinstitute.org](http://www.faithtrustinstitute.org)

## Broken Vows: Religious Perspectives on Domestic Violence

Broken Vows presents the stories of six battered women—Jewish, Roman Catholic and Protestant—and demonstrates how religious teachings have been misused to perpetuate abuse, and how religious communities can work proactively to end domestic violence.

## Pastoral Care for Domestic Violence: Case Studies for Clergy

This multifaith series of role plays demonstrates Catholic, Protestant and Jewish clergy effectively addressing common religious issues raised by victims, survivors and abusers in situations of domestic violence.

## Love – All That and More

Six-session curriculum with lesson plans, including background materials on healthy and abusive relationships; suggestions for the facilitator; discussion questions; and dynamic, interactive follow-up activities.

## To Save a Life: Ending Domestic Violence in Jewish Families

An essential resource for abused Jewish women, Jewish communal leaders, helping professionals and all who seek to break the silence about domestic violence in Jewish families.

## Garments for One Another: Ending Domestic Violence in Muslim Families

For mosques, religious leaders, social workers, community groups and shelter staff who offer help to Muslim women who currently experience violence in the home.



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