

THE BLACK MOUNTAIN PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH RESPONSE TO FAMILY VIOLENCE

*The Spirit gives us courage . . . to hear the voices of people long silenced,
and to work with others for justice, freedom, and peace.*

*From A Brief Statement of Faith
Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)
The Book of Confessions, 10.4*

After a long silence, the voices of victims and survivors of domestic violence are calling us. They call out for hope – that the violence will end, that they will find a safe space. They call out for justice – that those who have tried to usurp God’s sovereignty will be brought to accountability. They call out for healing – that the Jesus who gave wholeness to the blind, the lame, and the outcast will transform their lives as well.*

* *Church & Society: Social Justice Actions of the 213th General Assembly*, July/August 2001, p. 14

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Note: in the interest of readability, the batterer is referred to as “he” and the victim as “she” throughout this document. Certainly, men are sometimes victims and women perpetrators; relationship violence is inexcusable regardless of the abuser’s gender. However, data collected from human service statistics, studies, surveys, census polls, crime reports, etc., invariably show that victims of domestic violence – particularly physical abuse – are overwhelmingly female (85-95%).

THEOLOGICAL STATEMENT

Domestic violence is a clear manifestation of human sin at work in the most intimate of human relationships. It is a gross distortion of the covenant of love between married or unmarried partners, or the violation of a relationship of love, trust, and care between parents and children. Abusers use several forms of domestic violence against family members, including a pattern of physical, sexual, emotional, and psychological attacks or neglect; isolation; and economic coercion. At the core of any expression of domestic violence is the perpetrator's distorted use of power and control over other family members. Each type of abuse can occur between spouses and partners, against children, against siblings, and against elder members of a family.

Domestic violence has reached epidemic proportions in this country and is found in all aspects of society: in all religious groups, classes, and races; in all types of families and communities; in rural and urban settings. Abusers or perpetrators are likewise found in every realm of society, regardless of educational training or occupational skill, income level or gender. It is a reflection of the pervasiveness of sin at work in every aspect of our culture and behind the thresholds of many American families.

God created us male and female, saying, "let us make humankind in our own image, according to our likeness . . ." *Gen.1:26*. It is worth noting that God's speaks in the plural, evoking an understanding of God's identity as being in relationship with God's total self. If both male and female are created in the image of God, then both are sacred manifestations of God's being. Neither gender has been granted sole interpretive authority of the will or Word of God about intimate relationships. Human beings are created to be in partnership with God and with each other, and our concept of partnership is illustrated in the covenantal relationships that God established with many biblical couples, including Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebecca, and Joseph and Mary. Human partnership is most fully developed in the context of covenant when both parties bind themselves to each other through self-giving love and mutual forbearance.

In addressing the community of Corinth in the thirteenth chapter of 1 Corinthians, the Apostle Paul defines the role that self-giving love is to play in human relationships. As such, this passage applies not only to relationships within communities of faith, it also communicates a very tangible ethic for the intimacy of family relationships. "Love is patient, love is kind, it is never envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful, it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. Love bears all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends." This passage identifies the high level of commitment and devotion involved in covenantal love. When used as a guide for one's own actions within family relationships, this passage sets a standard of behavior and accountability reflective of the love of Jesus Christ.

However, the Church and individual Christians have used this passage to manipulate victims of domestic violence. In such cases, the covenant of marriage and the well-being of an individual are pitted against each other. Too often the victim's safety is relegated to a degree of importance secondary to the preservation of the covenant and its outward appearance within the larger community. Too often the suffering of Christ is upheld as a model of endurance for the abused spouse. Such an interpretation of Christ's sacrificial love distorts what he accomplished through his crucifixion and resurrection by suggesting that enduring the abuse is somehow redemptive to the victim, the perpetrator or the relationship. This interpretation is a gross distortion of the meaning of the cross of Christ for humanity.

In actuality, both the covenant of marriage and the victim have been repeatedly violated by the abuser. A choice to preserve the covenant at the expense of the victim fails to honor the sanctity of human life in males and females, parents and children. Abuse in any form – physical, emotional, sexual, economic, or neglect – is a violation of God's will for humanity and for the abused individual who was created in God's image.

Therefore, Christ's Church must respond to abuse as a matter of justice and righteousness. The church has been called by Christ to serve as his body, to care for those who are marginalized and oppressed, to bring about hope and healing to broken lives and broken relationships, and to speak boldly against the injustice of domestic violence while working to heal its effects. The church is also called to minister to all individuals whose lives are broken by sin, including the perpetrators of injustice, by calling them to repentance and guiding them to work toward the restoration of their victims.

This raises the complex role of forgiveness between perpetrator and victim and between the perpetrator and the community of faith. Forgiveness cannot be ignored. It is essential in bringing about the wholeness of all of the parties involved. However, neither the victim nor the community of faith can easily forgive the perpetrator until the abuser recognizes and accepts total responsibility for the effects of the abuse on the victim and the entire family.

Abuse in each of its forms severely damages level of trust between the perpetrator and other family members. When abuse is physical, it damages the body of another, in some cases crippling the victim for life or in extreme cases resulting in the death of the victim. When abuse is sexual, it distorts the victim's sense of self and perception of sexuality as a sacred gift of God. When abuse is emotional, it damages or destroys an individual's self-esteem and potentially scars the psyche of the victim for life. When abuse is economic, it creates a distorted dependency of the victim on the perpetrator as the sole source of well-being. In all cases, abuse is driven by the need of the perpetrator to exert power and control over the life of another human being, which then distorts the identity of the other and violates the important dimension of mutuality that makes for healthy human relationships. Domestic violence in all its forms instills fear as the predominant emotional dynamic in the relationship.

Each of these distortions has such an impact on human beings that apologies fall far short of the restoring the well-being of the victim and the relationship. Neither should the victim ever be counseled to forgive the perpetrator without the perpetrator's full participation in rectifying the consequences of the abuse for all parties involved. This may involve paying medical bills, counseling for the victim and other family members, counseling for the perpetrator, and other corrective measures.

STATEMENTS OF CONFESSION, AFFIRMATION AND COMMITMENT

WE ACKNOWLEDGE:

- That all forms of domestic violence are violations of God's will for victims, for perpetrators, for churches and wider communities, for humankind.
- That domestic violence is epidemic within our society; that it crosses all educational, economic, racial, ethnic, social and religious boundaries;
- That Christ calls BMPC to respond to abuse as a matter of justice and righteousness.

As a people who believe that God intends for all to live with integrity of body and spirit in freedom, in relationship, and in joy, **WE CONFESS:**

- We have not always heeded the victims' cries for help.
- We have too often offered abusers cheap grace.
- We have not challenged a society that legitimates and promotes abuse through the portrayals of women, children and men as objects in entertainment and advertisements.
- We have allowed, in our theology, representations of women as the cause of sin, deserving of her demise, secondary in nature, needing to be controlled.
- We have misused the Holy Scriptures.
- We have misused the biblical teachings of the relationship of wives to husbands, children to parents.

We have within our faith tradition many beliefs that can help us understand our responsibilities to victims and perpetrators of domestic violence. **WE AFFIRM:**

- God's sovereignty empowers us to take up God's passion for peace and justice.
- Human beings are created in the image of God, an image restored to wholeness in the person and work of Jesus Christ, who freely offers abundant life to all.
- Human beings are created to live in right relationships with one another that include peace, love, respect, mutuality, dignity and joy.
- Love of neighbor requires us to do all that is within our power to provide sanctuary and promote healing.
- We have been created by God to have integrity of body and spirit. Whether it be physical, sexual, emotional-psychological, or verbal, domestic violence inflicts harm and suffering on God's good creation of the whole person.
- We have been created to be free people with the capacity to consent to relationships and to participate with others in decisions affecting our lives. Through intimidation and silencing, abuse diminishes the power of victims to choose for themselves.
- We have been created in covenantal relationship with God and people. Domestic violence and abuse destroy covenants in which people have promised to treat each other with respect and dignity.
- We have been created to rejoice. Domestic violence works to destroy the capacity for rejoicing.

In obedience to Christ's call for BMPC to respond to abuse as a matter of justice and righteousness, we will hear the voices of victims and survivors and respond to their calls with the following goals: first, to work to protect the victims from further abuse; second, to stop the abuser's violence and hold the abuser accountable; and third, to restore the family relationship if possible or mourn the loss of relationship.

In our ministry to victims and survivors, **WE THEREFORE COMMIT:**

- To help provide physical and emotional safety;
- To respect the autonomy of able adult victims by acknowledging their right to control their own lives and make their own decisions; by offering information and resources, then supporting their decisions even if we disagree.
- To honor confidentiality.
- To listen to victims and survivors as they break the silence, cry out, tell their stories, and deal with the memories.
- To believe and validate the victims'/survivors' experiences.
- To acknowledge the injustice and let victims and survivors know that the violence perpetrated against them is not their fault.
- To offer a community of friendship and support to victims as they plan for future safety.
- To remember and communicate that God offers grace and hope for healing.

For the abuser, we will be a vehicle of God's love, justice and grace. In ministering to perpetrators,

WE THEREFORE COMMIT:

- To firmly state that violent words and behavior are unacceptable and must stop.
- To reject the abuser's rationalizations and victim blaming, and to encourage the abuser to accept full responsibility for abusive behavior.
- To insist that concrete action accompany contrition, such as honoring a victim's request to separate and be free of harassment, attending a treatment group, and providing all possible restitution for damages to person, psyche and property.
- To offer hope for forgiveness and a call to discipleship.
- To remember and communicate that God offers grace for forgiveness and hope for change.

In order to prepare our church leadership and congregation to respond to domestic violence both within our society and within our congregation, **WE COMMIT:**

- To provide adequate training for pastors, church officers, caregivers and volunteers to recognize and respond appropriately to domestic violence.
- To educate children, youth and adult members about the availability of local domestic violence resources, and to communicate that specific trained church personnel are available to discuss past, existing or potential domestic violence.
- To regularly preach about domestic violence through the ministry of the pulpit.
- To address domestic violence often and regularly through liturgy, prayers, stories, testimonies, minutes for mission, information printed in newsletters and the guide to worship; thematic workshops, Bible studies, and Sunday School presentations.

STRATEGY FOR IMPLEMENTATION

WHO NEEDS WHAT INFORMATION?

Ministers, Session Members and Advocates:

- Overview of the written materials including the theological background statement, the policy statement, the couples counseling position statement, this document, a synopsis of state and local laws, and educational materials.
- An educational presentation by Betsy Warren (a professional resource in the field of domestic violence) and Kevin Frederick, providing training for the leadership of advocates within the church and an opportunity to view the video *Broken Vows: Religious Perspectives on Domestic Violence*.

Congregational Members:

- Two worship services addressing domestic violence and the response of the faith community.
- Bulletin inserts summarizing the church policy and procedural guidelines for cases of domestic violence within the church family.
- After sessional approval, a mailing to all members stating the position of the church, with open letters speaking directly to victims, perpetrators and children.
- Annual observation of Domestic Violence Awareness Month each October in worship and throughout the life of the congregation.
- Inclusion of victims of domestic violence in the pastoral prayers on a regular and ongoing basis.
- In-depth training for ministers, educators and specific members as advocates for victims, perpetrators, and other family members where domestic violence has occurred.
- The education of all church members about available resources, options, and the legal implications of various courses of action.

Victims, Perpetrators and Family Members:

- A list of local referrals and resources.
- Information about possible options for victims.
- Easily accessible copies of the book *Keeping the Faith*. This small book corrects the misuse of scriptural text and theological doctrine commonly twisted to portray God's "approval" of family violence.
- The commitment of the church to ensuring that there are no insurmountable barriers between those affected and available resources. For example, trained advocates will provide childcare, transportation, and information about financial resources.
- First-step assistance provided by trained and informed programmatic staff.
- The opportunity for connection with a trained confidential advocate who can help victims, perpetrators, and family members think through the physical, emotional and legal issues and the available courses of action.

BLACK MOUNTAIN PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH WILL:

- Educate the congregation about the nature and complexity of family violence, and about the church's policies and responses when domestic violence occurs or is suspected.
- Stand as a witness to and defender of the Christian ideal of marriage.
- Address the issue of family violence holistically. The church will train individuals who can serve as advocates for the victim, children, the perpetrator, and other family members.
- Understand the limitations of the legal system to resolve domestic violence. The church advocates for more effective intervention than the civil authorities can provide including restorative justice for the victim and children.
- Provide this document to other Presbyterian churches, the Presbytery of Western North Carolina and General Assembly Offices that address domestic violence.
- The session will consider, after the first year of implementation, adding an outreach ministry to families in Black Mountain who are facing domestic violence.

POSITION STATEMENT: COUPLES COUNSELING IN FAMILIES WITH SPOUSAL ABUSE

NOTE: This statement draws heavily from *Confronting the Batterer*, by Phyllis B. Frank, M.A. and Beverly D. Houghton, Ph.D., for the Volunteer Counseling Service of Rockland Co., Inc. The original document is at www.cpsdv.org/Articles/Couples%20Counseling.PDF.

Couples counseling is not a viable therapeutic tool for violent family relationships. Black Mountain Presbyterian Church defines a violent family relationship as one in which physical or sexual assaults occur, threats of violence occur, and/or one partner lives in an environment of fear caused by the other partner.

Couples counseling can be very helpful in resolving some marital problems. However, ***abuse is not a marital problem. Physical violence, sexual violence and threats of violence are crimes.*** Abuse is a behavior that is solely the responsibility of the abuser, and that person alone is capable of changing it. This is true regardless of any “provocation” alleged by the abuser: the behavior of one family member cannot compel another family member to be physically, emotionally or sexually violent.

Black Mountain Presbyterian Church understands that attempting couples counseling with those in an abusive relationship is inappropriate and can even be dangerous. Even though a victim in a violent relationship may request couples counseling for “her” or “their” problem, and even if both parties want to maintain the relationship, counseling them together could:

1. Endanger the victim, who may face greater violence for revealing information during counseling that her partner does not want her to disclose;
2. Imply that abuse is acceptable to God, and that the onus is on the victim to forgive, submit, or somehow “behave;”
3. Imply that the minister or counselor condones violence or considers it unimportant;
4. Lend credence to the common misconception that victims are responsible for the violence inflicted upon them;
5. Encourage further denial and minimization of the abuse as the counseling focuses on the couple’s interaction.

BMPC also understands that couples counseling cannot be effective unless there is a balance of power between the partners. An emotionally and/or physically violent relationship is based upon a power *imbalance*: the abuser has control over his victim. **Equality and honesty, both critical to effective couples counseling, are impossible if one person fears retaliation for revealing the truth about the relationship.**

Because of the power imbalance, the inequality, the control, and the fear, **Black Mountain Presbyterian Church will not practice and will actively discourage couples counseling in abusive relationships.** We affirm the following:

1. Ministers and/or church counselors will not assume that a balance of power exists in a couple requesting counseling, or that each partner is able to talk honestly and openly in each other’s presence. Both parties will be interviewed separately and asked directly about the existence of violence, coercion, psychological abuse, and control within the relationship.
2. The victim’s safety will be the primary concern at all times, superseding all other considerations.

3. BMPC will encourage each partner to receive separate individual intervention. Only when the abuser has demonstrated a verifiable history of and commitment to non-violence and equal power, and when the victim indicates that she feels safe, unthreatened, and willing to pursue the relationship – only then will BMPC consider providing couples counseling.
4. Any overt or covert message from a minister or other church counselor that the victim should change her behavior in order to stop her partner's violence is totally unacceptable.
5. Couples counseling should never be considered an alternative to legal remedies for violent behavior.
6. The abuser is solely responsible for his choice of violence as a means of control over his victim. Any counseling he receives should focus on his acceptance of accountability for the violence, and on developing alternative, non-abusive and non-controlling behaviors.
7. Counseling for the victim should help refocus her attention on her own needs for safety, support, and self-esteem; her worthiness of respect as a child of God; and her absolute right to a peaceful environment.

BMPC recognizes that, **if an abusive partner is truly motivated and committed to change, then with God's help he may be able to end his violence and his need for control.** If this happens and the relationship is still unbroken, then couples counseling may be a viable modality – but only for nonviolent couples when both partners have separately requested it. Conditions that will precede couples counseling include:

1. The abuser participates in an ongoing batterer's program to maintain his behavioral change and to demonstrate his commitment to long-term recovery;
2. The abuser acknowledges full responsibility for his violence, and recognizes his ability to control his behavior;
3. A significant period of time passes (approximately one year from onset of treatment) during which there is no further abuse;
4. The victim confirms, in a separate session, her partner's ongoing nonviolence and her willingness to participate in couples counseling.

An abuser and his victim have two entirely different problems. The abuser's problem is his controlling and violent behavior. The victim's problem is that she is coupled with an abuser. Black Mountain Presbyterian Church understands that these two distinct issues are safely dealt with only in separate counseling, after the victim's safety has been assured. Couples counseling will not be offered until and unless the four conditions outlined above have been met.*

* Source materials: *Confronting the Batterer*, by Phyllis B. Frank, M.A. and Beverly D. Houghton, Ph.D., for the Volunteer Counseling Service of Rockland Co., Inc.; and the Couples Counseling Position Statement of Helpmate, Inc., of Buncombe County, NC.