

# Domestic Violence in the African American Community

## The Role of the Black Church

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### Introduction

Domestic violence is a pattern of abusive behavior in which a person uses coercion, deception, harassment, humiliation, manipulation, and/or force to establish or maintain power and control over his or her intimate partner. Economic, emotional, psychological, physical, sexual, and verbal tactics are used by perpetrators to control and obtain power over their partners.<sup>1</sup>

Domestic violence crosses ethnic, racial, age, national origin, sexual orientation, religious, and socioeconomic lines. The majority of victims of domestic violence in heterosexual relationships are women. One out of every three adult women experiences at least one physical assault by an intimate partner during adulthood.<sup>2</sup>

In recent years, the definition of domestic violence has expanded to include other forms of violence, such as the abuse of elders, children, and siblings. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) has redefined the term “domestic violence” and uses the preferable, more specific “intimate partner violence” (IPV), which includes violence between same sex partners and male victims of violence.<sup>3</sup> In this paper, the term domestic violence will be used interchangeably with the term intimate partner violence.

African Americans experience domestic violence at a high rate in comparison to their numerical representation in the population. Although domestic and sexual violence occurs in all socioeconomic classes, socioeconomic disadvantages do increase the risk of the incidence of violent crimes. In intimate partner violence cases of spousal assault, power balance is an important risk factor. Among domestic violence cases, husbands who have (or feel that they have) less power than their wives are more physically abusive toward them, because of the perceived lack of power in other areas of their lives.<sup>4</sup> This paper will focus on issues of intimate partner violence for African American women in heterosexual relationships.

### Domestic Violence in the African American Community

#### *Intra-family Violence*

Violence done to people of color is permissible! The most permissible form of violence in communities of color is that against women of color, by men of color (or by white men) with whom the women of color are in relationships.<sup>5</sup> Intra-family violence rates have been found to be higher for African American families than for any other racial group. In the United States, there is a high correlation between homicide rates and being poor and Black.<sup>6</sup>

A key contributor to the high intra-family homicide rates in the African American community is the negative relationship between them and the criminal justice system. The historical record of how African Americans have been treated in the United States by the judicial system is a paramount problem when dealing with domestic violence in the African American community.

#### *Racism*

It is well documented that race is not a factor in who may be involved in situations of intimate partner violence. However, racism does play a role in: 1) the lack of access to resources that would assist African Americans (and other people of color) in their rehabilitation from IPV; and 2) how both African American victims and perpetrators are treated and perceived by the criminal justice system.<sup>7</sup>

Racism faced by communities of color is systemic and institutionalized. Race plays a major role in: 1) how a domestic violent act is perceived by the criminal justice system; 2) how a woman is perceived as the victim (many women of color are stereotypically looked upon as “loose” women not worthy of help, or, more devastatingly, as women who *ask* for the violence); and 3) how the perpetrator of color is treated by the criminal justice system *if* the crime is reported. Will he be treated fairly? Will he be brutalized by the police? Both are valid questions.

### *The Issue of Poverty*

Poverty is the foremost quandary for the African American community. Everyone who participated in this research study—religious leaders and other professionals—concurred that the lack of economic security is a crucial contributor to domestic violence incidences within the Black community. Poverty plays a fundamental role in the many social ills that plague the African American community as a whole, and African American women and children specifically.<sup>8</sup>

Poverty, as manifested through racial discrimination, has limited the African American community's access to quality education for children, job opportunities, clean and safe places to live, and nutritious food to eat—all which directly relates to the amount of “money,” or household income, available.

Studies have shown that in heterosexual relationships, males feel emasculated when the woman earns \$400 (or 4 percent) more a month in income. Once the male feels emasculated, there is a very high probability that he will abuse his wife or partner. And, the wider the earning gap between the man and the woman, the greater the severity of the violence against her.<sup>9</sup>

The Reverend Dr. Aubra Love, founder and executive director of the Black Church Domestic Violence Institute (BCDVI) in Atlanta, Georgia, is an ordained pastor in the Southern Conference of the United Church of Christ. A domestic violence survivor, Dr. Love established the BCDVI in 1994 to address the faith-based issues and lack of culturally competent domestic violence resources and services in the United States and the Caribbean. On the issue of economic abuse, she states:

The traditional economic model of the family, which casts the man as the sole breadwinner, does not reflect the reality in most families of color, where both partners are expected to hold jobs. So, African American women readily accept responsibility for contributing to the household's income. The economic abuse that gets acted out in the home can involve controlling behavior where the man may interfere with the woman's ability to make decisions regarding family finances, even commandeering wages that she may have earned herself. Women who often work minimal wage jobs have sometimes had to choose between the abuse at home and being homeless with children. Approximately one-third of all women with children in the homeless shelters cite domestic violence as the primary cause of their homelessness (Philadelphia Health Management Corporation). Homeless mothers are at risk of losing their children to the foster-care system through mandatory actions of child protective services. Currently, welfare reauthorization bills of the United States Congress do not adequately address this economic abuse of mothers who have lived in domestic violence. The federal re-

vamp offers incentives to state governments to marry off mothers who depend on public assistance; and the welfare-to-work model sends single mothers with children, and minimal skills, into the job market. The present trend to coerce poor mothers to marry does not promote self-sufficiency or acknowledge the impact of domestic violence on the lives of women and children. Allocating 320 million for “marriage promotion” programs as a method of reducing poverty minimizes and ignores the violent crime of domestic violence that is reported by 60 percent of the women on welfare. This ignores the victimization of poor women while trying to ensure that they don't financially burden the society. Generally, people who earn lower wages are taxed at a higher rate and carry a disproportionate burden of the cost of our public services. Why then would we expect and encourage working poor people to marry, as a means of relieving taxpayer costs, rather than reassessing our military spending? These collective issues affect a person's faith walk and their understanding of what it means to be in close relationship with God, in the face of this injustice.<sup>10</sup>

### *Issues of Violence against African American Women*

African American women (women of color) live in the dangerous intersection of gender and race. As dual minorities, these women are most likely to live in extreme poverty, in segregated areas, and in poor housing. They are frequently exposed to violence in the home and on the street, in addition to experiencing a series of health problems and social stresses.<sup>11</sup>

Internal and external oppression prevents African American women from addressing the multiple issues of violence as manifested through rape, incest, and domestic violence. They have, under the various guises of compassion, religion, or “strong black womanhood,” allowed some African American men to treat them as though they are the men's worst enemy; and for this physical and emotional sacrifice, they have been accused of trying to usurp the men's power and dignity. The women's awareness of the systematic oppression of African American men through lynching, imprisonment, unemployment, and the sexual politics of sexual violence<sup>12</sup> has outfitted women to be understanding and tolerant of words and actions that hurt them.<sup>13</sup>

### *African American Men Who Batter*

Of all people imprisoned in the United States, most (54 percent) are African American.<sup>14</sup> Young African American males between the ages of eighteen and twenty-four years make up the largest population group in American jails. Currently, more African Americans are in prison than are in college.<sup>15</sup>

The disproportionate number of African American men incarcerated, and the high mortality

rate among Black men, exacerbates the issue of “fatherlessness” in the African American community. Many young African American males grow into manhood in environments where they receive little or no positive reinforcement or role models for their manliness, thus perpetuating the vicious cycles of poverty, violence, abuse, and fatherlessness that are transferred, like DNA, from generation to generation. These factors (and others) contribute to the oppression felt by the African American male. By the time these boys become men, their internalized oppression is transformed into violent acts against the people closest to them, their women and children.<sup>16</sup>

The intersection of race, social status and violence, as it pertains to African American men, creates a set of issues that has not been adequately discussed in the literature. Two theories of intimate partner violence among African American men are the Maladaptive Response Theory and the Interactional Theory.<sup>17</sup>

Dr. Oliver Williams, an African American male scholar and founder and executive director of the Institute of Domestic Violence in the African-American Community, indicates that, although these theories may offer partial explanations about intimate partner violence and the maladaptive behavior of the African American male, his perspective concerning domestic violence is that “. . . social oppression, sexism, male socialization, and social learning are the underlying conditions of violence; controlling and abusive behaviors are the results. Legal accountability is used to sanction and control maladaptive behaviors.”<sup>18</sup> It should also be noted, that Williams clearly specifies that there is no excuse for African American men to abuse their women, and that African American men should be held accountable. Concerning accountability, he says, “African American men who batter must consider that if societal oppression influences their life, then African American women are also affected by the same oppression [of racism], and the [added] oppression of the sexual abuse [they themselves inflict].”<sup>19</sup>

#### *African American Children Who Are Victims of or Witness to Violence*

Childhood exposure to violence has a pronounced effect on later involvement in violent relationships, as either a victim or a perpetrator. Boys are most affected by the witnessing of parental abuse, and those who witness violence are more likely to become perpetrators of violence.<sup>20</sup> A high percentage of men who abuse their wives have witnessed

parental violence, as boys. Women who were sexually abused or molested as girls are at a higher vulnerability (than women not abused as girls) to being victims, in a violent intimate partner relationship.<sup>21</sup> In an address given to domestic violence advocates in April 1992, at the inaugural meeting of the Jane Doe Safety Fund, William Delahunt, then District Attorney of Quincy County, Massachusetts, reported that a survey conducted of young men between the ages of eighteen and twenty-five who were incarcerated for violent crimes showed that 70 percent reported being physically abused by their fathers. And, almost 90 percent of these same young men reported to have witnessed domestic violence between their parents.<sup>22</sup>

#### **The Black Church**

For the African American community in the United States, the Black Church is the oldest and most stable infrastructure. Historically, the Black Church has been, and still is, the place where important issues concerning the African American community are addressed: it was the mainstay political structure for the Civil Rights Movement.<sup>23</sup> Victims *and* perpetrators of domestic violence are sitting in every church in the United States every Sunday morning<sup>24</sup>—including the Black Church. This issue, like other prevalent societal issues, is also found in the church.

An active-passive denial is engaged when African American men are the oppressors of African American women. The women have been oppressed—to serve, to serve, and to serve, even at the expense of their own safety. The conflict that the abused African American woman faces is either to continue in the state of oppression or to risk being isolated, defamed, or degraded if she speaks out. Either choice leaves her in a probable state of “isolation” and “aloneness,” which adds to the internal and external oppression she already experiences.<sup>25</sup>

The “yoke of silence”—in the name of racial solidarity—also weighs upon the Black Church community. The silence of the church regarding the “abuse of women” is in conspiracy against the total liberation of the African American community. An African American woman is expected to “suffer in silence” for the sake of others; when she assumes this role on the Black church, she is elevated to the level of martyrdom. Hence, her oppression is guaranteed.

Despite its flaws in terms of gender discrimination and its patriarchal history, the Black Church in the Boston area, and nationally, is a strong supporter of activities and programs that combat domestic violence within the African American community.

## Voices from the Community

### *The Role of the Black Church*

The Black Church, together with other church cultures, has the special responsibility of understanding and addressing the issues that surround domestic violence in its community. One important role the church can take is to acknowledge that domestic violence is a “live” issue, to call it by its name and to acknowledge that it does occur. The Reverend Dr. Gloria White-Hammond, co-pastor of Bethel American Methodist Episcopal Church in Boston, states:

We need to take responsibility that these issues are in the church. If it is in the world, it is in the church. We need to preach and teach about it, as a live issue, making it clear that we are available to minister to the entire family, making it a priority that people are safe. Everyone is safe, the children, the woman and the man. We need to make clear what is acceptable and what is not acceptable. The Black Church has an awesome responsibility in combating domestic violence, and sending the clear message that it is not acceptable.<sup>26</sup>

The role of the clergy and religious leaders, in combating intimate partner violence, is to offer support to both the victims and perpetrators. According to Deacon Carolyn Ramsey, founding executive director of the Jane Doe Safety, Inc.:

The role of the clergy is key in understanding domestic violence, because women come to their pastors for all types of things. Pastors need to be trained not to blame the woman, and to understand that domestic violence is a sin. It is a sin and it is a crime, and you can go to jail for hurting someone. . . . The role of the clergy is key in understanding, and relaying to the community that domestic violence is a crime and a sin. The pastor has to be able to tell the perpetrator that domestic violence is a crime, and that this behavior is punishable by law. Whereas, we are in the healing and forgiveness business, the clergy should also think about the children, and also facilitate counseling for the victims and perpetrators.<sup>27</sup>

The Reverend Jeffery Brown, pastor of Union Baptist Church in Cambridge, envisions the church as a lighthouse in the time of darkness: “Churches must be a haven for those who have been battered and bruised, mentally, physically, and/or psychologically. The church has to be the lighthouse; it [the church] should shine the light in the darkness, the reality of God’s light.”<sup>28</sup>

There are two systemic issues that exist in every church, regardless of race and denomination, related to domestic violence in the homes of their parishioners. These are gender and theological issues.<sup>29</sup> In the Black Church, a third category, cultural issues, also exists.<sup>30</sup> “By not addressing these

issues, the church has left the women thinking, ‘Is God with me?’” states Dr. Ann Marie Hunter. She continues: “The non-activity of the church precipitates a faith crisis. The victims are living in shame. The silence concerning the violence is similar to the conflict [in the Bible] between Israel and Egypt. This oppression turns into injustice, and the oppression–injustice motif is extended.”<sup>31</sup> The Reverend Cheryle Albert, assistant pastor of Union Baptist Church in Cambridge and director of programming for the Safe Havens Family Violence Prevention Project, comments: “There are three major changes that need to be made in the Black Church if we are to adequately address the issue of violence. They are: gender based, cultural, and theological.” “We [African Americans] do not know how to process violence,” says Rev. Albert. “We need to change our mindset about violence and then the behavior will follow.”<sup>32</sup>

According to Rev. Love:

On any given Sunday, a historic Black Church may be more than 75 percent female parishioners. While domestic violence is prevalent in all communities, many people in religious African American communities tolerate it as normative behavior. Many of these women have endured incest, sexual violence, and battery. These issues have to be addressed if [we] really want to touch the sacred place, the true place of vulnerability [with God]; only then can we be the truly beloved community. It [domestic violence] disrupts their relationship with God.<sup>33</sup>

The Black Church is accountable to its community and must try to understand domestic violence, since it is related to these other issues. Only then, according to Shawn Lyons, assistant pastor of Peoples Baptist Church in Boston, will the church, and the community, have a more comprehensive picture of the problem and be able to evaluate the issues pertaining to the community and congregation.<sup>34</sup> Pertinent questions that the clergy and other community leaders must ask are: How do we recover? How do we respond? How do we counteract the negative results of intimate partner violence and the related issues? How can we prevent domestic violence from occurring within our family? What are the signs? How do we fix the problems?

### *Theological Issues—*

The Reverend Lorraine Thornhill, pastor of First Holiness Church in Cambridge, gives an insightful view on the domestic violence issue. A trained social worker, she indicates that the batterer has an ego problem, and spiritual healing is needed for a bruised ego.

According to Reverend Thornhill, the most frequently misunderstood scripture that relates to domestic violence between husbands and wives is Ephesians 5:22–28:

Wives submit to your husbands as to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife as also Christ is the head of the church; as he is the Savior of the body. Therefore just as the church is subject to Christ, so let the wives be to their own husbands in every thing. (NKJV)

The words in those verses that are used to justify or exonerate domestic violence acts are: “head,” “submit,” “in everything.” When the husband misinterprets this scripture, he feels justified in thinking that, if his wife does not submit to him in *everything*, then it is his role to chastise her abusively. He does not read these verses in context, nor does he consider the time in which they were written, or for whom they were written.

As teachers of the Bible, it is important that church leaders communicate the word of God in its correct context. It is the church’s responsibility to portray to the congregants the correct context in which a text was written: *when* it was written, *who* the audience was, and *what* was going on during the time it was written, says Rev. Thornhill. She further states:

We need to preach self-control, and deal with the ego. We need to teach how to deal with relationships, how to communicate in relationships, premarital counseling before you get married. We need to understand what is in your background, as a child. We need to ask the couples: Did you witness violence as a child? We should question the couple in how they deal with stress, asking them, what stresses you out in a relationship? Domestic violence is wrong. In Proverbs [Proverbs 29:11], the Bible tells us that we must learn how to control ourselves. Domestic violence is about power and control. One must look at their ego, how they deal with themselves.<sup>35</sup>

Church leaders should demonstrate, scripturally, the anti-domestic violence message of the Gospel, says Rev. White-Hammond. One scripture that has been especially helpful in challenging people on these issues is Malachi 2:16, where God talks about hating divorce. She states:

He [God] says He hates divorce, and He hates a man quoting himself in violence, in the context of marriage. If we are looking forward to producing a generation of godly offspring, then there is no room in the family for violence in any form. I think the clergy should make that clear, in terms of its proclamation and it’s witness, and really hold people accountable.<sup>36</sup>

“The heart of domestic violence is our image of God and creation,” states the Reverend Karen

Montagno. “I see domestic violence as an issue of power and powerlessness. If we can truly understand that we are created in the image of God, and that other people are also, then one would think they abuse one of God’s creation.”<sup>37</sup>

The church’s role is its expression of ministry as it deals with everyday problems of society, states the Reverend Jeffery Brown: “The church should do its homework and determine the needs of the community. . . . The church should offer more spiritual than psychological support to issues [of domestic violence]. The role of the church is to examine how the spirit is affected by the abuse, shining the light [on the abuse], and offering the hope of healing through Jesus Christ.”<sup>38</sup>

#### *Gender Issues in the Black Church—*

Leadership in the Black Church has traditionally been heavily male. There is a need felt for more women to be involved in church leadership.<sup>39</sup> “We certainly want to send a message that women have a role in terms of leadership, and it is not about men being dominant over women,” states Rev. White-Hammond:

Equity is needed in terms of respect for women, and in the power of relationships, and it needs to appear across the board. Whenever the church identifies macho-chauvinistic tendencies, we need to address and readdress those issues. A strong message needs to come from the church that men and women are equal partners. There is no room for church politics and home life domination of males over females. It is important that the church address issues [e.g., of gender, domestic violence] head on. We sometimes backpedal and say that families need to stay together and wives need to submit; in that context submission looks like subservience. We have not been a part of the solution, we have been part of the problem, and we need to examine our culpability, to some extent, in having women stay in crazy relationships. We have made some progress, and there are certainly some wonderful resources available now to faith communities that will help us to rethink our approach and to understand scriptural texts in a more equitable context.<sup>40</sup>

When more women acquire positions of leadership in the church, a structural change will occur, and the issues that are unique to or impact women disproportionately will be addressed from a position of leadership.<sup>41</sup>

#### *Cultural Issues and Other Issues—*

Practical life situations, life stresses, no job, no education, no place to live, and no money—all these are cultural issues that contribute to domestic violence. Money is something that is a stressor in life. Life sit-

uations and day-to-day survival are the major issues associated with domestic violence in the African American community. In the Boston area, housing costs are an added major problem.<sup>42</sup>

“There is a narrow understanding, in our community of what is domestic violence. The challenge of domestic violence is social, financial and spiritual, and all these components have broken down in our community,” notes Rev. Lyons.<sup>43</sup> Domestic violence is also rooted in prior experiences, says Rev. White-Hammond. There is never a justification for it, and both the perpetrator and the victim have issues that need to be addressed. Domestic violence can be complicated by individual situations in the home and by issues in the broader society.<sup>44</sup> Rev. Montagno concurs:

Society as a whole is a very violent society. As an oppressed people, the world itself does not smile on us and say, “You are a beautiful beloved creature of God,” so that is something that we will have to tell each other. That is universal: people who may have been abused may be frustrated in their own life, or they may be just plain mean people who do not have any self-esteem and use abuse, drugs, alcohol, and prostitution. All of these things are associated with violent behavior. One usually lashes out at things that are seen as less powerful than you—your cat, your dog—and when you know you can hurt people with your words, how much more do you think you can hurt them if you hit them?<sup>45</sup>

Some clergy have also indicated that substance abuse, a poor economic situation, skin color (racism), a refusal to play the game, and the industrialization of prisons are all related to domestic violence in the African American community.<sup>46</sup>

### *Finding Healing Solutions*

The first and most important action that must be taken when a victim of abuse comes forward for help is to ensure that she (or he) and their children are safe. Once you are assured of their safety, it is also important to provide for their basic needs: food, clothing, shelter, and sleep. When this goal is accomplished, one can begin the healing process. As eloquently noted by Deacon Ramsey:

My primary concern would be their safety—trying to access if the person thinks he or she is in danger, and trying to access where the person is, and how I can best help them at the moment. Remove the victim from a place of danger; counsel them, the victim and the perpetrator; contact the other people that need to be involved in order to facilitate counseling. Spiritual healing is necessary, along with all the other work that is done. I do not see compartmentalization of healing. It all works together to build a pattern of healing. Faith is the component that is constant in the healing.<sup>47</sup>

*Voices of the clergy, religious leaders, and professionals articulating solutions for healing from domestic violence in the African American community—*

*Montagno:* “It is important to know that healing is a process, and that there is room for healing. God does the healing, but certainly we are the instruments of that healing. Scripture can be used in several ways, and it does have a word of peace. God cares for His creation, He is always calling us back to Him, as a mother cares for her infants. God has such a love for us, wanting us to be safe, contented, and in a state that we can grow in. This is something that I would keep reminding them [victims and perpetrators]. I would be annoying them with this point, when they came to see me. I would petition them to keep asking God to come into their situation, which will be a healing piece.”

*White-Hammond:* “The healing may come in the short term, and it may come in the long term. It may be that the relationship is restored and the home is maintained, but it may also come in the long term where they are in completely different places, and he [or she] will have to get his [or her] healing somewhere else. What healing looks like depends on the couple. The obligation that we have as ministers is to both the victim and the perpetrator, and our hope is that they are respectful of that and do the work around whatever fuels the anger for them. Whatever it is, we walk them through the process, as long as [they] are amenable to that; it is our hope that the couple’s relationship can be restored. Sometimes that is possible, and at other times people have to separate, and go different ways.

*Ramsey:* “You must be careful when you do couples counseling. Couples counseling sets up a very safe environment, within the confines of the office of the minister and/or counselor. It seems safe, until you walk out of the door and the perpetrator can say, ‘Why are you telling my business to the pastor?’ There was a woman who was actually killed right outside the pastor’s office, because the secret was out. The most dangerous time for the woman [victim] is when the secret is out, so be careful about couples counseling.<sup>48</sup>

*Montagno:* “The first thing that I would do is to listen to them. I will try hard to suspend my own judgments and listen, because a lot of people are not listened to—just to be able to hear their story as it unfolds and the way they want it to come out, initially not worrying about the particulars; just hearing their perspective of where they are and what their life is like. They may need comforting as the story comes out. It may take a long time or it may take a series of [long] times, but just [being listened to] is healing.”

*Reason:* “Healing comes through the power of prayer. Calmness, the ability to think, rational decisions come from prayer.

*Brown:* “We need to rely on the word of God as spiritual undergirding so as to keep balance. We allow the cares of the world to choke out the word of God. We can ask God to release us from this violence.

*Montagno*: “Sometimes people are so overwhelmed that they cannot locate a scripture passage. But if you can find a few verses, for example, of Psalm 23, or one of the Psalms that laments yet speaks about God’s care and God’s delight in each of us—just one small reading can help.”

*White-Hammond*: “Biblical knowledge is important, yet professional Christian counselors can also be utilized. Part of the abundant life that the Lord calls us to is the working through of our emotional, intellectual, and spiritual issues. There are resources available to us to do that, and the church communities need to identify those resources and see that our people are in the right place to take advantage of them. We are slowly getting past the paranoia about therapy and we are understanding that therapy does not mean that you are crazy. It does raise the issue that some of the thorns are deeply seeded, and pulling them out is a process that both victims and perpetrators can engage in.”

*Brown*: “We need a holistic approach to healing—healing of the family system. We need to deal with who the person [perpetrator] is as a person: what are they struggling with personally? Emphasize to the men that they must keep and maintain the law. Healing is not just the resolution of a situation. There are psychological scars and wounds that often remain open. One must also heal the memories, hurts that cut deep. We [ministers] must offer spiritual help, more than psychological help. How is your spirit affected? We [ministers] must offer the shining light, the hope of healing through Jesus Christ. We [ministers] should serve as an under-shepherd.”

*Thornhill*: “There is a difference between forgiveness and trusting. One must earn back trust. . . . Spiritual healing is needed for all parties involved, victim, perpetrators, and their children. We must preach self-control. How do we deal with relationships? How to talk to each other? Healing does not mean that you forget that it happens; you can be healed, but you still have scars. You will have to deal with the scars and learn to trust again. Healing is a process. Sometimes in the healing process you will think about the incident again. Healing is brought about by prayer, and, by listening to the victim’s story, allowing her (or him) to bring it all out.”

*Yassen*: “It is important to understand that the victims care about their partners. There is a part of [an abuser] that is not abusive. The victims and the perpetrators need spiritual healing. Groups that are led by batterer experts [who may or may not be religious] may prove to be helpful to both the perpetrator and the victim.”

*Montagno*: “[We need] the formation of groups for men, women, young women, and young men that will discuss issues that are significant to them—not domestic violence per se, but groups that will discuss: What does it mean to be a man of God? A woman of God? A young woman of God? and What does it mean to be a young man of God?”

Women who are in abusive relationships need to develop a safety plan.<sup>49</sup> “Fifty percent of the victims are still living with their abusers” states Dr. David

Adams, founder and executive director of Emerge. Adams continues:

Women who are associated with their abuser cannot focus on their own recovery. They think that they are needed, but they are being used. They [the victims] are totally occupied in the recovery of the batterer [and not themselves]. We do not think that the victims bring the abuse onto themselves. The victims feel trapped. It is much easier working with men when the women take care of themselves. Men are more successful in their [rehabilitation] program when the women have a high expectation of the man’s [abuser’s] participation [and follow-through] in the program. Women of color are economically dependent upon their men. The large number of African American men in jail has an effect on the women’s reaction to abuse. The women are afraid that if the man goes to jail, he may not come back. The batterer should be thinking about self-care and self-improvement. They [the batterers] should focus on education, more jobs, and spending more time in their children’s life. A unique message for the African American men, who bought into the program, is: Be thoughtful for your relationship.

*McCloskey*: “The cycle of violence has an effect on children. The dominant effect is aggressive behavior. Boys are slightly affected by the aggressive behavior, but girls are more affected and exhibit more aggressive behavior. Girls also start dating earlier, usually date older men, and thus get beaten up earlier. Bridges need to be rebuilt. People are stuck. Victims and perpetrators, both are in their suffering [post-traumatic stress disorder and post-traumatic slave syndrome]. What is needed is something that will engage the girls, that will build up their self-esteem. There are things for men [boys], but very little for girls. Children who are abused are derailed in so many ways. One of the greatest contributions in assisting women to overcome domestic violence is the feeling of resourcefulness that she gets from employment. This is a good measure to help women heal.”

The church needs to address its denial concerning domestic violence. Suggestions made for ways in which the church can help are: serve as a safe place for survivors; participate in the Safe Havens Program; engage in internal reflection [of the church]; develop policies against domestic violence; hold perpetrators responsible for their actions without endangering the victims; don’t give perpetrators public honor; nor remove them from the congregations; there must be accountability.<sup>50</sup>

*Albert*: “The church can focus on changing the systemic issues that produce change: intervention, resource, knowledge, and awareness. The church needs to ask itself: What is violence? What is violence in the church, within the house of faith? If we focus on education and help to establish a knowledge base of what abuse is, a red flag will go up when you are in an abusive situation, even if you do not completely understand what is happening to you.”

Other healing methods included: the need for more Christian education; sermons that speak against male domination and abuse; and women in leadership roles in the church.<sup>51</sup> And, in the state of Massachusetts, one of the greatest needs is for transitional, safe housing. Many of the batterers do not abide by the restraining orders. There needs to be a safe place for the victims.<sup>52</sup>

### Conclusions

The most riveting factors that perpetuate domestic violence in the African American community are poverty and racism. Poverty as manifested through racial discrimination limits the access African Americans have to a quality education, jobs, and a safe environment in which to raise their children. The social stresses associated with the lack of economic security, for certain people and communities, are a severe ethical travesty in American society. The poor economic conditions of the African American community are correlated with the lack of resources necessary to combat not only intimate partner violence, but also other issues that precipitate domestic violence. The Boston area in particular has an extreme problem with the lack of affordable, adequate housing. The astronomical cost of housing in this area creates a tremendous stress associated with having a place to sleep, not to mention something to eat. This disparity contributes greatly to the issues associated with domestic violence in the African American community (communities of color), in the Boston area.

The Black Church, despite its patriarchal history, is a major supporter for the resolution of these issues affecting the African American community. The church has supported and assisted in the implementation of programs within the community that tackle issues of intimate partner violence.

Still, more women are needed in functional leadership roles within the Black Church. As more women take on leadership roles, are seen as equal partners, and are given the same respect as male leaders, then the issues associated with gender domination of women by men will be more adequately and effectively addressed—domestic violence being only one such issue—not only in the Black Church, but in all churches.

### Notes

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4. Mary Lystad, Matilda Rice, and Sandra Kaplan, "Domestic Violence," in *Family Violence: A Clinical and Legal Guide* (Washington, D.C.: American Psychiatric Press, 1996), 45.

5. Maryviolet Burns, "The Speaking Profits Us," in *Violence in the Lives of Women of Color* (Washington, D.C.: Center for the Prevention of Domestic Violence, 1986), 4.

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10. Aubra Love, founder and executive director of the Black Church and Domestic Violence Institute, telephone interview by author, 9 April 2002. See also the BCDVI web site: [www.bcdv.org.aol.com](http://www.bcdv.org.aol.com).

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14. Angela Browne and Erika Lichter, "Imprisonment in the United States," *Encyclopedia of Women and Gender* (New York: Academic Press, 2001), 1: 611–23.

15. S. R. Donziger, *The Real War on Crimes: The Report of the National Criminal Justice Commission* (New York: Harper Press, 1996); quoted in Angela Browne and Erika Lichter, "Imprisonment in the United States," *Encyclopedia of Women and Gender* (New York: Academic Press, 2001), 1: 611–23.

16. Oliver Williams, "Healing and Confronting the African American Male Who Batters," in *Family Violence*

and *Men of Color: Healing the Wounded Male Spirit*, ed. Ricardo Carrillo and Jerry Tello (New York: Springer Publishing, 1998).

17. Oliver Williams, "Group Work with African American Men Who Batter," *Cura Reporter* 25, no. 1 (1994): 91–103; quoted in Oliver Williams, "Healing and Confronting the African American Male Who Batters," in *Family Violence and Men of Color: Healing the Wounded Male Spirit*, ed. Ricardo Carrillo and Jerry Tello (New York: Springer Publishing, 1998).

18. Williams, "Healing and Confronting the African American Male Who Batters." On the Institute for Domestic Violence in the African American Community, see [www.dvinstitute.org](http://www.dvinstitute.org).

19. *Ibid.*

20. Angela Browne, "Violence in Marriage: Until Death Do Us Part?" in *Violence Between Intimate Partners: Patterns Causes and Effects*, ed. A. P. Cardarelli (New York: Allyn and Bacon, 1997); and Betsy Groves McAlister and Barry Zuckerman, "Interventions with Parents and Caregivers of Children Who are Exposed to Violence," in *Children in a Violent Society*, ed. J. D. Osftsky (New York and London: The Guilford Press, 1997), 183–201.

21. Angela Browne, Brenda Miller, and Eugene Maguin, "Prevalence and Severity of Lifetime Physical and Sexual Victimization among Incarcerated Women," *International Journal of Law and Psychiatry* 22, no. 3-4 (1999): 301–22.

22. Carolyn Ramsey, deacon at the Resurrection Lutheran Church, Roxbury, Mass., interview by author, tape recording, 13 March 2002, Cambridge, Mass.

23. Aldon Morris, "The Black Church in the Civil Rights Movement: The SCLC as the Decentralized Racial Arm of the Black Church," in *Disruptive Religion: The Force of Faith in Social Movement Activism* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 29.

24. Miles, "Violence in Families."

25. Frances Woods, "Take My Yoke upon You," in *Troubling in My Soul*, ed. Emilie Townes (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1993), 37.

26. Gloria White-Hammond, co-pastor at Bethel American Methodist Episcopal Church, Boston, interview by author, tape recording, 11 February, 2002, Boston, Mass.

27. Ramsey, interview.

28. Jeffery Brown, pastor, Union Baptist Church in Cambridge, Mass., interview by author, tape recording, 25 March 2002.

29. Cheryle Albert, assistant pastor, Union Baptist Church in Cambridge, Mass., and director of programming at Safe Havens Family Violence Prevention Project, telephone interview by author, 9 April 2002; and Hunter, interview.

30. Albert, telephone interview.

31. Hunter, interview.

32. Albert, telephone interview.

33. Love, telephone interview.

34. Shawn Lyons, assistant pastor of Peoples Baptist Church, Boston, interview by author, tape recording, 18 March 2002, Boston, Mass.

35. Lorraine Thornhill, pastor of First Holiness Church,

Roxbury, Mass., interview by author, tape recording, 19 March 2002.

36. White-Hammond, interview.

37. Karen Montagno, dean at Episcopal Divinity School and Episcopalian Priest in Cambridge, Mass., interview by author, tape recording, 7 March 2002.

38. Brown, interview.

39. Herman, interview; Montagno, interview; and White-Hammond, interview.

40. White-Hammond, interview.

41. Montagno, interview.

42. Thornhill, interview.

43. Lyons, interview.

44. White-Hammond, interview.

45. Montagno, interview.

46. Daniel Reason, pastor of Holy Temple Church, Roxbury, Mass., interview by author, tape recording, 16 March 2002.

47. Ramsey, interview.

48. Thornhill concurs that couples counseling shouldn't be done, and that individual counseling is safer; Thornhill, interview.

49. David Adams, founder and executive director of Emerge, a men's counseling service on domestic violence, telephone interview by author, 17 April 2002; Hunter, interview; and Ramsey, interview.

50. Hunter, interview; David Adams, telephone interview; Yassen, interview; and Williams, "Healing and Confronting the African American Male Who Batters."

51. Herman, interview; White-Hammond, interview; Montagno, interview; and Ramsey, interview.

52. Hunter, interview; and Yassen, interview.

## Appendix: Selected Resources on Family Violence

AWAKE (The Advocacy for Women and Children in Emergencies)  
Children's Hospital in Boston  
300 Longwood Avenue  
Boston, MA 02115  
617-355-6000

Children Witness to Violence Project  
Betsy McAlister Groves, LICSW  
Department of Pediatrics  
Boston Medical Center  
91 East Concord Street, 5th Floor  
Boston, MA 02118  
617-414-4244

EMERGE  
Dr. David Adams, Founder  
*A Men's Counseling Service on Domestic Violence*  
2380 Massachusetts Avenue, Suite 101  
Cambridge, MA 02140  
617-547-9879

JANE DOE SAFETY FUND, Inc.  
14 Beacon Street  
Boston, MA 02108  
617-248-0922

Judicial Oversight Demonstration Project  
Dorchester District Court  
510 Washington Street  
Dorchester, MA 02124  
617-288-9500  
[www.dvi.neu.edu/ers/2nd/3rd/project/jodp.html](http://www.dvi.neu.edu/ers/2nd/3rd/project/jodp.html)

SAFE HAVEN Family Violence Prevention Project  
Rev. Dr. Ann Marie Hunter, Founder  
*Interfaith Partnership against Domestic Violence*  
131 Cambridge Street (Old West Church)  
Boston, MA 02115  
617-227-6992

The Trauma Center  
14 Fordham Road  
Allston, MA  
617-782-6460

Victims of Violence Program  
Central Street Health Center  
26 Central Street  
Somerville, MA 02146  
617-591-6033

Women's Center  
46 Pleasant Street  
Cambridge, MA 02139  
617-354-8807

#### *Shelters*

Casa Myrna Vazquez	617-521-0100
Elizabeth Stone House	617-522-3659
FINEZ House	617-436-0831
Harbor COV	617-844-9799
Renewal House	617-227-4194

Toll Free Hotline: 1-800-799-7233