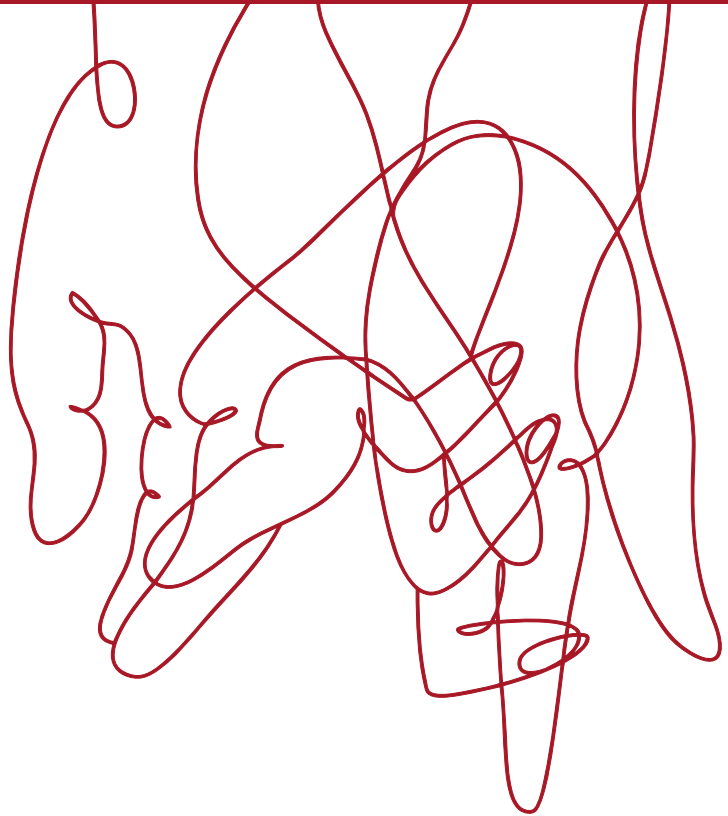


A Biblical View of Relationships to End Domestic Abuse





This booklet has been produced by the Christian Network to End Domestic Abuse.

We thank the original contributors to this Biblical Framework, a team of twenty women from across the globe who formed the taskforce on domestic abuse of the Women's Commission of the World Evangelical Alliance (named the World Evangelical Federation). They framed the document as a first priority in understanding and dealing with "the immense and sinful problem of abuse".

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Introduction

One tragic consequence of the Covid19 pandemic has been the dramatic rise in domestic abuse cases across the world. Lockdown has meant that perpetrators have 24 hour a day access to their victims; and the victims – mainly women and children – have no way out.

United Nations Secretary-General António Guterres called it a “horrifying global surge in domestic violence”.¹

The escalation in cases² and reporting on the topic has opened discussion in church communities as never before.³

How should Christians respond to abuse and pain in families? How should they counsel women and men caught in abusive relationships?

This booklet wants to help us all understand what the Bible says about healthy relationships and how to prevent abuse. It aims to equip local church leaders to identify the issues, to affirm loving relationships and to respond with care to cases of abuse.

We are called to acknowledge the prevalence and severity of abuse, to respond compassionately to those who suffer, and to aid in their healing through practical and spiritual support.

We must be praying for those who are being abused and for the specialist services working tirelessly to get people to safety. We must also be petitioning governments to give specialist services adequate financial support. And let us be vigilant to help those who might be in need, even the abusers.

¹As long ago as 1997, the World Evangelical Fellowship acknowledged the immensity and sinfulness of the abusive violation of women and girls. In 2020, Pope Francis called for all churches to support victims, “Sometimes women risk being victims of violence in a cohabitation that they bear like a weight that is far too heavy.” Reuters, 13-04-20

²In Australia, there was a 75% surge in Google searches for help regarding domestic abuse. Calls to domestic violence helplines in Cyprus rose 30% and in Rio de Janeiro, domestic violence prosecutions rose 50%. The number of women dying as a result of physical violence doubled in many places from Egypt to India

³For resources on responding to abuse during Covid19, https://www.anglicancommunion.org/media/415112/2007-da-covid-19-churches_en.pdf

God's view of the value of all human beings

The Bible affirms in its opening chapter that all human beings are made in the image of God, and have the same dignity and value in God's sight.

Then God said, *"Let us make human beings in our image, in our likeness so that they may rule....So God created human beings in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female He created them."* Genesis 1:26-27⁴.

It is the obligation of all believers to respect and honour one another and to promote each other's well-being.

Paul tells the Romans, *"Be devoted to one another in love. Honour one another above yourselves."* 12:10⁵

In Christ, there must be no partiality or discrimination based on social class, wealth, gender or race. Paul makes that clear in the much quoted verse – *"So in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith, for all of you who were baptised into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, neither male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus."* Galatians 3:28⁶

We are called to *"submit to one another out of reverence for Christ"* (Ephesians 5:21); and because we have the power of the Holy Spirit, these high standards of relationship are possible.⁷ Included in the things we must exclude are anger, rage, filthy language and malice: instead we aim to clothe ourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience (Colossians 3: 5-10).

The Scriptures tell us that God's intention for the family is peace and security from oppression. Isaiah spoke of a city where *"children will be taught by the Lord and great will be their peace. In righteousness*

⁴See also, Gen 5:2-3; Acts 17:25-26; James 3:9

⁵See also Romans 15:1-2; Galatians 6:2; Colossians 3:12-13

⁶See also James 2:1-9

⁷Galatians 5:22-26, Colossians 3:8

you will be established; tyranny will be far from you; you will have nothing to fear.” 54:13-14

The passage so often used at weddings proclaims the ideal love we seek in all our relationships, *“Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It does not dishonour others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. Love never fails.”* 1 Corinthians 13:4-8

It is clear that God wants us to live in peaceful and compassionate relationships. Faith should make us loving, not violent; and gentle, not abusive.

“So we, though many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another.” Romans 12:5

Healthy marriages

Harmony in the home is everyone’s responsibility. While the Greek word, *‘hupotasso’* is often translated *‘submit’* when it refers to wives (see Colossians 3:18), it has various meanings in the New Testament and in other contemporary literature.

The term can mean to comply with, to be loyal to, to associate or identify with, to commit oneself to, to behave responsibly toward, to fulfil one’s obligations toward another, or to make a meaningful relationship. These values can do much to enrich a marriage.

In whatever sense persons choose to understand *‘submit’*, it is important to note that every time the Scriptures speak of wifely submission, there is a specific directive to prevent spousal abuse: In Ephesians, Paul tells husbands, *“to love their wives, as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself.”* (5:28-29)⁸

⁸Likewise, Colossians 3:18-19 and 1 Peter 3:7

The statement that the husband is head of the wife is intended as a picture of intimate relationship and tenderness rather than as the basis for control or abuse (see Ephesians 5:23). The word for 'head' used here is 'kephale' in Greek, which means source or one who goes ahead. So the word implies serving and protecting. It is an image used elsewhere for interdependence and mutual support in the body.⁹ If Paul had wanted to mean head as ruler, he would have used 'arche' which we find in words like archangel or archenemy. Jesus warned his disciples against ruling or lording it over one another when he said, "Whoever wants to be great among you must be your servant".¹⁰

The theme is taken up in a different way when Christ as head and heavenly bridegroom enables the development of the full potential of the Church as bride. The truly loving husband enables his wife to be a complete person fully equipped to serve Christ.¹¹

An abusive spousal relationship cannot possibly be a picture of Christ's love for the Church. God calls Himself the Husband of Zion¹² and as such promises that she shall not know oppression or terror. God's description of His care contrasts with broken human relationships where the woman has been rejected.

"Your Maker is your husband - the Lord Almighty is His name - the Holy One of Israel is your Redeemer; He is called the God of all the earth. The Lord will call you back as if you were a deserted wife and distressed in spirit, a wife who married young only to be rejected." (Isaiah 54:5-6)

Scripture enjoins husbands and wives to accord each other honour rather than insult, injury, and degradation.

The fruit of the Holy Spirit offers a direct antithesis to abuse: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (Galatians 5:22).

⁹See 1 Corinthians 12:21 and Ephesians 4:15-26

¹⁰Mark 10:42-44

¹¹Ephesians 5:25-27

¹²Jeremiah 3:14

Preventing abuse against women

The Bible's prophets listened to God's Word and boldly proclaimed it. They were led by God to lament the evil in the world around them and to make specific issues a matter of deep prayer and reflection. They exhorted men and women to assess their attitudes and challenged them to alter their behaviour. Even though they were often unpopular, they were faithful in their task of proclamation.

The same pattern applies for today's Christian leaders. We must perceive the condition of society; acknowledge its sinfulness, and invest ourselves in prayer and study of the Scriptures as we look to God for prophetic voice and action.

An evil of which we would prefer not to speak is abuse and violence against women. We would like to think that it cannot happen among Christians, and surely not in a Christian home or church. Yet research in Ecuador and Peru in 2013 showed that 70% of evangelical adults had suffered some kind of domestic violence in the last three years.¹³ A study in the UK found 42% of interviewees in churches had experienced some form of abuse in their relationship and for the majority, this was long-term.¹⁴ The hard facts compel us to acknowledge that sinful practices are being ignored or tolerated or sometimes even perpetuated in the Church as well as society at large.¹⁵

Women worldwide continue to report that domestic violence is a major problem.

We must also acknowledge that childhood incest and abuse, and

¹³The research was conducted by Paz y Esperanza, *Comunidad and Restored among 2027 evangelicals*. 60% of evangelical women and 40% of evangelical men in Peru said they were victims of sexual abuse as children. In Ecuador, the figures were 40% and 20%. In Argentina, it was 30% and 20%

¹⁴Research conducted by Restored, 2018, <https://www.restored-uk.org/resources/in-churches-too-church-responses-to-domestic-abuse/>

¹⁵Julia Baird, an award-winning Australian journalist, has researched abuse inside the Church and reports that many church leaders seriously underestimate the extent and impact of domestic violence and abuse. <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/05/10/opinion/churches-can-no-longer-hide-domestic-violence.html>



parents allowing their children to be trafficked for sexual or labour servitude are issues that are so abhorrent, churches must talk about the dangers.¹⁶

Frequently, the Church and its leaders have not fully realised the enormity of the problem or the long-lasting physical, social, psychological, and spiritual harm that is done to victims and their families. The Church community is not heartless, but frequently Christians do not know how to address a situation when a woman has been abused.¹⁷

Yet, the call to Christian compassion and action is very clear in prophets like Jeremiah. *“Administer justice every morning; rescue from the hands of their oppressors those who have been robbed”* 21:12.¹⁸

This is a point at which we must examine carefully what the Scriptures have to say. Many abused women have been revictimized by manipulations of Christian truth. We need to clarify the misconceptions about what the Bible says regarding violence against women. We must come to the Scriptures and ask questions both old and new.

How Church culture can enable abuse

We are well aware that all have sinned and come short of the glory of God; and we know too that even born-again believers sin. The Holy Spirit who indwells us is grieved, but nevertheless Christians can make their own choices, for good or for evil.

We must be very clear about the Bible's condemnation of violence and abuse. There are more than one hundred Biblical passages

¹⁶See Joy Wilson, 'Ministering to Victims of Incest', 2017

¹⁷We want to acknowledge that men who are the victims of abuse may face a different set of barriers to being believed and helped. About 85-90% of abuse victims are women but men can suffer abuse - often it takes the form of emotional and psychological manipulation rather than physical violence

¹⁸See also Jeremiah 22:3, 15-18

addressing battering, violence, rape, incest, stalking, lying in wait, twisting the words of another, threats, and intimidation.

Since the Word of God condemns violence and abuse, the Church must be faithful in teaching this truth, but how often do we hear preaching about the horrors of violence and the consequences for women?

The Bible tells us that there are serious consequences for abusive behaviour – God will not tolerate outwardly pious actions that hide quarrelling or strife; and will not listen to the prayers of those with *'wicked fists'*.¹⁹

Paul warns young Timothy and Titus that an elder or bishop should not be abusive.²⁰ The King James Version declared that the individual should not be a *'striker'* while more modern translations often use the word *'violent'*. The original Greek quite literally means *'one who hits'*.

If Paul is warning against such behaviour, it must have been an issue – one he is willing to tackle. And so should we.

Another specification for leadership is having a family with good relationships. Paul uses words like *"temperate, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach, not given to drunkenness, not violent but gentle"*. (1 Timothy 3:3-4). Verbal or sexual abuse in the home disqualifies anyone to take responsibilities in the family of God.

Paul declares that no one should abuse or exploit another in sexual relations, whether in or outside of marriage. *"avoid sexual immorality, that each of you should learn to control your own body, in a way that is holy and honourable, not in passionate lust like the pagans who do not know God; and that in this matter no one should wrong or take advantage of a brother or sister."* I Thessalonians 4:3-6

Although husband and wife are to share their bodies with each other (1 Corinthians 7:3-5), this must be done not with cruelty and coercion but in love, honour and holiness.

¹⁹ See Isaiah 58:4; 1 Peter 3:7

²⁰ 1 Timothy 3:3 and Titus 1:7



The Church's response to abuse

Scriptures tell us that it is the obligation of the people of God to *“deliver the needy who cry out one, the afflicted who has no-one to help.”* (Psalm 72:12).

Why do we so often ignore abuse even when we know that it is going on in a church home? Our duty is to secure the safety of the victims and to offer them whatever aid we can: intervention, emotional and spiritual support, housing, food, child care, counselling, prayer, and love.²¹

A major misconception is that a woman²² ought to suffer in imitation of Christ so that her husband will be converted through her suffering. It is true that the Bible commends those who suffer as Christians and refuse to deny the faith. Yet the well-known passage on suffering in 1 Peter is addressed to those who are suffering as Christian during a time of persecution.²³

It does not endorse believers allowing themselves to be abused. Although Christ was willing to lay down his life to procure our salvation, in other situations He defended himself against violence, slander, deception, and verbal and emotional abuse.²⁴

The kindly and gracious attitude of a wife may turn a husband to Christ; however, continuing to endure his abuse is damaging to everyone's spiritual life.

Another damaging teaching is that a woman in a relationship with an abusive person should pray more earnestly to 'solve' the violence because it would be wrong for her to end her one flesh

²¹Among many verses, see Deuteronomy 15:7-11; Isaiah 58:6-10; Ezekiel 18:5-9; Matthew 25: 31-46

²²As stated earlier, in this article we are generally referring to woman as victims of abuse, rather than as perpetrators as up to 90% of victims are female

²³1 Peter 2:18-19 and 4:14-16

²⁴See Luke 4:28-30; Mark 3:22-30; John 8:48-59, 10:39

union.²⁵ Pastors seem to value the bonds of marriage over the safety of victims. This attitude also implies that the woman may be contributing to the violence.

All of us earnestly desire that troubled marriages should be healed, but when an abuser refuses to change, the abused must protect her life and that of her children. The favoured option in abusive relationships is for the abuse to stop. However, if repeated attempts by the pastor and care-giving community to assist in stopping the abuse fail, other options need to be explored including separation, intervention and legal action. Too often, churches put more emphasis on saving a marriage than they do on the wellbeing and safety of the victims.

It is all too common for a husband to use the Bible verse about submission to justify violence or to think that a woman may have contributed to the violence by doing something wrong.²⁶ This false teaching is allowed to continue, perhaps with a shrug or perhaps with open endorsement from pastors.²⁷

How do we deal with abusers?

Another sort of help must be provided to the offender, who must be held accountable for his deeds. Often the perpetrator is more eloquent and more persuasive than the victim, and so the church supports him in harsh judgement and disbelief of the victim.

The New Testament teaches that the believing community must correct an individual who sins: violence against one's own family is indeed a grievous sin.

²⁵ Marriage was given to bind together a man and a woman as one flesh in perfect union (Genesis 2:24; Ephesians 5:31)

²⁶ The 2013 research (see Footnote on P5) found that 30% of respondents said that a wife is battered because she doesn't submit to her husband. 20% of evangelicals in Ecuador and 30% in Peru and Argentina thought the domestic abuse victim must have done something wrong to incite violence

²⁷ In Matthew 18:15-17, Jesus tells his disciples what to do if someone sins against you. Abuse victims have usually more than fulfilled the first step of this, so then the church should step in; but if the abuse does not stop, then Jesus is clear the 'abuser' should be removed

“Those elders who are sinning you are to reprove before everyone, so that the others may take warning.” (1 Timothy 5:20).²⁸ The Bible is specific that an offender needs to stand under the censure of the church body.²⁹

Those who know of the abuse should not continue to act as though nothing is amiss. Silence can be misinterpreted as tacit approval.³⁰ For too long, churches have wanted to protect their reputation or the reputation of a church pastor, and have chosen to ignore or cover up abuse. Silence, secrecy, or concealment are not God’s way of dealing with abuse.

An abuser may be mentored, monitored, and ministered to; but he must be made to understand that such behaviour is not acceptable among believers. There must be no tolerance for the offence. When abuse problems arise, Christians must respond in obedience to God’s Word.

We must let an abuser face the consequences of his behaviour.³¹ There must be no effort to obtain a lighter sentence, to be excused from an abusers’ group, or from court ordered counselling. We need to make sure that we let just and legal consequences do their work.³²

What about repentance?

The Church must be aware that an abuser may appear very repentant. Indeed, he may be very sorry for the harm he has caused to another, but even more sorry that his sinful behaviour has been disclosed. Remorse is not the same as repentance (Hebrew 12:17).

A period of contrition tends to follow an outburst of violence and is not to be confused with genuine repentance. Abuse often occurs

²⁸Matthew 18:15-17; James 5:19-20

²⁹See 1 Corinthians 5:1-13; 2 Thessalonians 3:6, 14-15; Proverbs 3:31, 24:1-2

³⁰Paul himself had given quiet approval to the killing of Christians - see Acts 7:58

³¹Psalms 7:16 says, “The trouble they cause recoils on them; their violence comes down on their own heads.”

³²See 1 Corinthians 5:5; 1 Timothy 1:20)



in cycles: first, the abuse, then a honeymoon period (during which the offender seeks forgiveness) and then rising tension until there is another episode of abuse.

True repentance means taking the steps, doing whatever is necessary to be done so that the abuse does not happen again. This may mean finding an accountability group, joining an abusers' group, having individual counselling, or going through a period of isolation and reflection. True repentance involves transformed behaviour, that the victim and/or children recognise as a marked turnaround. Just as Saul, the murderer, became the Apostle Paul, so by God's grace the violent can develop changed attitudes and reformed behaviour. The path to recovery is often a painful one that calls for the prayerful support of God's saints with regular monitoring and reviews.

Forgiveness and Reconciliation

Much is written in the Bible about forgiveness, and often a pastor is very quick to demand that a wife must forgive the husband who says that he is sorry. But forgiveness is the work of the Holy Spirit. For the abuser, it must be preceded by true repentance. For the abused, forgiveness is part of the healing process and will take time and perhaps distance.

The victim has every right to be concerned for her own safety as well as that of her children. To insist upon a precipitous forgiveness may be to send a woman and her children to continued abuse or even death.³³ A victim may well need a protracted period of time before forgiveness is possible. This must not be forced or rushed. It may be a very long while before members of the family can feel safe around one who has betrayed their trust and endangered their lives. God can bring forgiveness at the right time and in an appropriate

³³To talk of death may seem overly dramatic but statistics across the world show that thousands of women die each year at the hands of their partner or ex-partner

way. It does not necessarily follow that the family can always be reunited even when there has been forgiveness.

The Bible has a lot to say about healing of heart and body. It also speaks of appropriate times and seasons, of a broken and a contrite spirit, and of renewal. God is abundantly able to heal all victims, even those who have suffered vile atrocities. Women who have been raped and those who have been victims of sex trafficking or war crimes need special care, compassion and practical support from the Church. Wounded persons need to recognize their need of a divine touch, as abusers need to recognize their need of repentance.

If reconciliation between an abused victim and the perpetrator is to occur, the groundwork should be laid carefully. No matter how much those who support the victim wish to aid the healing journey, they cannot control its timetable. Caregivers need to realise that abuse which has occurred over many years cannot normally be eradicated in a few months. Though God's touch of healing and recovery can bring instantaneous spiritual renewal, the scars of abuse often remain for many years.

It also takes time for an abuser to repent of his behaviour, to seek help and to begin to alter his abusive ways. If there is too hasty a reunion, the abuser may conclude that the offence was not actually a serious one. The victim needs time to pray and think through many aspects and implications of the next step in the journey towards wholeness of body and spirit. Both parties must carefully consider how to prevent a recurrence of the abuse and re-victimization.

In effecting a reunion, the faith community may be helpful, though members must be very careful not to rush or force the process, even if the woman is willing. Pastors and friends must realize that an abused woman³⁴ and her children may put themselves at risk and

³⁴The vast majority of abuse victims, over 80%, are women. 90% of sexual abuse victims are women (see UNWomen.org)

the church needs to be on its guard to monitor issues of safety as well as of healing.

We must recognize that the abuser too has been wounded, often by childhood trauma, and certainly by his or her own behaviour. This too calls for healing, for loving Christian support in the offender's efforts to make amends for the harm that has been caused to those nearest and dearest to them and to the faith community as well. While often God's ways of working are beyond human expectation and control, the church has an obligation to denounce the sin. The faith community is an integral part of the process by surrounding both victim and perpetrator with prayer, love, and practical support. As the love of God is manifested in acts of kindness and encouragement, the healing journey including the possibility of restoration – is augmented.

Hope for families

Christians sometimes idealize the family. The Bible tells of God's work through families even though they were deeply troubled. One need only think of the families of Adam, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and David to understand that no effort is made in the Biblical texts to deny or conceal the sad realities. As in Bible times, abuse knows no faith boundaries; it occurs both within and beyond the faith community.

The pretence of being a happy Christian family only confuses and compounds the tragedy of abuse against women. To deny, minimize or ignore the problem obstructs the work of the Holy Spirit. The Scriptures offer the hope of healing for troubled families, but it requires honesty, faith, hard work, and the support of the believing community.





Healthy Christian responses to physical and emotional domestic abuse

We call on all church leaders to acknowledge the extent of domestic abuse in the communities they seek to serve and in their church families.

We call on all Christians to understand that we should support victims of abuse in whatever ways we can - through prayer, practical help and professional advice.

We call on church leaders to acknowledge that some church teaching about abuse has been unhelpful and could in fact protect perpetrators.

We call on church leaders to speak up and preach about domestic abuse to make it clear that it is not acceptable in God's kingdom and to model healthy, Godly relationships of mutual submission and respectful of each other's God-given talents.

We call for churches to speak out about abuse and to not hide cases to protect the church's reputation or the reputation of the leaders.

We call for all churches to treat all their flock equally, not preferring powerful male voices over children, the elderly or women.

We call for pastors to collaborate with professional and legal services in the community as well as pastoral ones, to stop domestic abuse.

It grieves the authors of this booklet that twenty years after its original publication, the prevalence of domestic abuse is unabated.

We pray that there would be a stirring in the hearts of churches in all situations and nations to say No to abuse, No to silence, No to cover-ups, and to stand with those who through no fault of their own have had their self-worth destroyed by violence.

Resources Page

These resources will help you to find out more about Christian responses to domestic abuse

An overarching statement about the value of women and girls and the way forward to healthy relationships and behaviour is set out in the Call to All Christians 2019. Available in 10 languages, you can download it here www.riseinstrength.net/download-the-call

Natalie Collins, *Out of Control: Couples, Conflict and the Capacity for Change*, SPCK, 2019 (also available as an e-book)

Elaine Storkey, *Scars Across Humanity: Understanding and overcoming violence against women*, SPCK, 2015

Joy Wilson, *Ministering to Victims of Incest: A Model for Church Responses*, Xulonpress, 2017

Restored relationships, www.restored-uk.org, has a resource pack for churches, [Ending Domestic Abuse: A Pack for Churches](#), available in English, Spanish, French, Hindi, Arabic, Polish, Swedish and Russian

If you would like copies of this booklet or wish to translate it, OR if you have resources to share, especially in languages other than English, please contact CNEDA@worldea.org





Reflections on mutual respect in relationships

We hope you have found this booklet helpful. What could your next steps be?

The Bible has a number of stories of abuse that are rarely highlighted - it is painful to consider that God's people might have sinned in this way. But the stories are in the Bible and we must ask ourselves what God wants us to learn:

Look at the story of Hagar in Genesis 16. We rarely read this through the lens of Hagar's suffering, but she was abused by Sarai and Abram. Read the passage and ask God to show you the story in a fresh way. How does the Angel of the Lord respond to Hagar? And how should we respond to today's Hagers?

You could look too at the stories of Tamar, Judah's daughter-in-law (Genesis 38) and the Levite's concubine (Judges 19). And the story of Tamar, Absalom's sister (2 Samuel 13).

They are difficult to read.

What is God saying to us through these stories?

Actions are crucial for change.

Please take a prayerful look at the Responses page (p14) and consider what God is asking you and your church or organisation to consider. God is our enabler for changing the story of abuse to one of partnership, mutual submission and love, but we do not take that for granted.

Pray that God will give you increased sensitivity to 'see' the suffering of others and to come alongside in wise understanding. And pray for the Church to champion integrity in the way it handles moral issues like abuse.



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