

Discussed: battered women, Laodician mindset, study data, gift of knowledge, types of victimization, statistical methods, harsh punishment, challenging perceptions, financial difficulties, solicitation for murder, abuse prevention, *Steps to Christ*

Spouse Abuse in the Adventist Home

By René Drumm with Linda Spady

A third-generation Adventist, I still remember my shock when I initially realized that spouse abuse occurred among members of the Seventh-day Adventist Church. Soon after receiving my master's degree in social work, I directed a shelter for battered women and sexual assault victims. During the first year of my employment, we housed a local church member in the shelter.

The next surprise quickly followed when I heard the pastoral response to the situation. On Sabbath, the offender calmly picked up the offering, acting as if nothing were amiss, and I remember feeling confused. After church, the pastor approached. "I don't know why Sue [not her real name] went to your shelter. John said he never hit her." I listened without acknowledging anything that would compromise the victim's confidentiality.

Although I don't remember clearly what transpired because the incident occurred more than twenty years ago, my

mouth must have hung open before I closed it and thought sarcastically, "Well, if John *said* it, then it *must* be true! How naive can this man be?" Evidently, the pastor was only slightly more in the dark than I had been only a few months earlier, when I believed that spouse abuse happened only *out there*.

Perhaps this type of denial is due in part to what some have called the Laodicean mindset, a tendency to become indifferent and self-absorbed. The remedy for this condition is service to others. Our healing in Christ becomes exponential when we are in intimate service with him.



I have been privileged to lead a research team for the past few years investigating intimate partner violence (spouse abuse) among Seventh-day Adventists in the North Pacific Union Conference. The union leaders have made up an exceptional team with which to work. They are courageously making plans to address abusive relationships in spite of concern among some that acknowledgment of the problem would air the Church's "dirty laundry."

Conferences within the NPUC support Adventist domestic violence shelters and Polly's Place Network, an organization that helps promote education and healing that surround issues of abuse.

The research team has done considerable work analyzing the study data and is trying to understand the phenomenon of intimate partner violence. The team believes that some of the results may be generalized to Adventism in North America. Our data reflect a broad spectrum of adults from each conference in the North Pacific Union, with a total of 1,431 responses. Both men (40 percent) and women (60 percent) contributed to the study by filling out a questionnaire.

The results reveal a significant number of hurting people in our congregations. About one-third (33.8 percent) of the females and 20 percent of the males reported being assaulted by an intimate partner in an adult relationship. Almost half of the survey respondents identified a behavior at the hands of a husband, wife, or intimate partner that could be identified as abusive. Table 1 offers a comparison of physical violence among participants in our study and in other populations.

Although it is tempting to assert from these percentages that the rate of domestic abuse is higher among Adventists than society-at-large, it is premature to do so. As with larger national studies, we faced the persistent research problem that abusive incidents are underreported. Our team worked hard to overcome this difficulty through its research design.

It was our goal to set up a safe environment for participants to minimize underreporting and to protect those who participated. To begin, a family life professional at the randomly selected churches delivered a Sabbath homily that focused on healthy families. Afterward, adult church members were invited to give something back to their church: the gift of knowledge that would strengthen Adventist families by supplying information from which to build safety programs.

For additional privacy, men and women were invited to sit on different sides of the congregation. Those who completed a survey were asked to deposit it in a locked box. These precautions may have provided enough safety for church members to offer accurate information without underreporting their victimization.

Types of Victimization

The research team used a statistical approach to group the types of victimization. From the survey, we discovered that those who responded experienced several types of abuse with their intimate partners (husbands, wives,

Table 1. Physical Violence in North Pacific Union Conference and in Other Populations

Type of Assault (Lifetime)	WOMEN PERCENT		MEN PERCENT	
	NPUC	Others	NPUC	Others
Total (anyone reporting at least one of the following)	33.8	22.1 ^a –37.6 ^b	20.1	7.4 ^a –18.2 ^c
Threw, smashed, hit, or kicked something to frighten you	27.4	8.1	13.4	4.4
Pushed, grabbed, or shoved you	28.2	18.1	17.0	5.4
Beat you up	8.8	8.5	2.4	.6
Threatened to use a weapon on you	7.1	3.1	5.1	1.0
Used a weapon on you	2.0	.8	2.2	.45

^a P. Tjaden and N. Thoennes, *Full Report of the Prevalence, Incidence, and Consequences of Violence against Women Research Report: Findings from the National Violence against Women Survey* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Justice/Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2000).

^b A. L. Coker, P. H. Smith, R. E. McKeown, and M. J. King, "Frequency and Correlates of Intimate Partner Violence by Type: Physical, Sexual, and Psychological Battering," *American Journal of Public Health* 90, no. 4 (2000): 553–59.

^c J. Schaefer, R. Caetano, and C. L. Clark, "Rates of Intimate Partner Violence in the United States," *American Journal of Public Health* 88, no. 11 (1998): 1702–4.

Table 2. Categories and Percentages of Abuse

Categories	Survey Items	Percent Lifetime
Controlling and demeaning behavior	Told you what to do and expected obedience Made big family and household decisions without consulting you Limited your involvement with others Monitored your daily activities Ignored or discounted your accomplishments Was extremely jealous or accused you of having an affair Exhibited general contempt for your gender	65
Escalating violence	Insulted, swore at you, or called you names Destroyed property or cherished possessions Threatened to hit or throw something at you Threw, smashed, hit, or kicked something to frighten you Pushed, grabbed, or shoved you	46
Sexual victimization	Used pornographic materials Used sexually degrading language toward or about you Used you sexually against your will Persuaded you to do something sexually that you consider a perversion Raped you	29
Resource deprivation and leveraging the children	Did not let you have access to family/personal income Restricted your use of the car Prevented you from getting or keeping a job/education Deprived you of heat, food, or sleep Threatened to take the children away from you Threatened to abuse your children Abused your children or pets to punish you	25
Severe physical abuse	Threatened to used a weapon on you Used a weapon on you Beat you up	10

or live-in partners). These types we named Controlling and Demeaning Behavior, Escalating Violence, Sexual Victimization, Resource Deprivation and Leveraging the Children, and Severe Physical Abuse.

The most prevalent type of abuse was Controlling and Demeaning Behavior (65 percent). Almost half (46 percent) encountered Escalating Violence, and about one-third (29 percent) Sexual Victimization. One-quarter (25 percent) recalled Resource Deprivation and Leveraging the Children, and one in ten (10 percent) suffered Severe Physical Abuse. The items that comprise the categories, along with their percentages, are outlined in Table 2.

Factors Associated with Victimization

After discovering the types of abuse present in the Church, the research team wanted to know the characteristics of people most likely to report their abuse. Again using statistical methods, we discovered several



Table 3. Effects of Relationship Difficulties

Category or Type of Effect	Survey Item
Difficulties at home and at work	Been unable to prepare meals or keep normal routines for your children Taken your anger out on your children Parented your children less consistently because of marital difficulties Arrived late or missed days of work because of difficulties with your partner
Anxiety and depression	Felt your life was out of control Felt very nervous Felt so sad, blue, down in the dumps that nothing could cheer you up Felt worn out or tired Avoided thinking about the difficulties in your life
Suicidal ideation	Wished you could die Thought about taking your own life
Spirituality	Led you to distrust God Took away time from your personal devotions Discouraged you from going to church Kept you from giving tithe or offering Held you back from your Christian witness Decreased your church activities Led you to feel betrayed by the church and/or a pastor

factors consistently associated with victimization. In general, women were at greater risk than men. However, a comparison between findings in our study and national samples reveals higher-than-average male victimization rates. Although it is important to target women for immediate help, long-term plans to facilitate healing must include men as well.

Among both men and women, those who reported the most significant levels of abuse at the hands of an intimate partner were divorced or separated. Although this type of study cannot determine which event occurred first—abuse or divorce—logic suggests it was abuse that most likely influenced these victims to seek divorce or separation.

Other factors we found associated with every type of victimization were negative childhood experiences such as harsh punishment, physical and sexual abuse, and witness of violence. These findings support an abundance of professional literature telling us that children who experience violence (including overpunishment), child abuse, and sexual abuse—or who witness violence—are at higher risk of victimization as adults.

Based on these findings, we encourage the Church to

prioritize the development and promotion of programs for divorced or separated individuals, especially women, who have experienced childhood trauma. Targeting these groups would maximize resources and begin with individuals most affected by violence. Whether or not this will actually happen anytime soon, however, is related to other findings from the study, particularly in regard to church members' opinions about spouse abuse.

As the research team investigated those opinions, we learned that more than half (54 percent) of those who participated in our survey did not agree with the statement, "Domestic abuse is a serious problem in the Adventist Church." More than half of our church members either do not know the extent of victimization in our congregations or deny its existence.

Given the reality of congregants' experiences as victims, challenging this perception must become a priority. Congregants will not support programs for which they see little need. It is imperative that abuse of any kind be clearly and consistently condemned from the pulpit and that the extent of the problem be communicated from every official voice of the Church. The Church must take responsibility for promoting healthy

relationship skills among its constituents or face increasing physical, emotional, and spiritual difficulties.

As shown in Table 3, our analysis of the data indicates clearly that abusive behaviors manifested themselves in four major areas: at home and work, anxiety and depression, suicidal ideation, and spirituality. Furthermore, we discovered that all of these were sig-

Steps to Christ. The Adventist church did nothing to help address the victim's needs or those of her children.

Today, the woman, the potential target of death, and her children are all members of that Baptist church.

I do not know if this account is typical for the Seventh-day Adventist church as a whole, but one story like this is enough to point out our need for more appropriate action,

What do churches actually do when violence takes place?

nificantly more likely to be present among people who had experienced recent abuse through controlling and demeaning behaviors and among those who had recently passed through economic difficulties. As with other research, ours pointed to a strong connection between financial difficulties and abuse.

What is our church currently doing to help the victimized? At the Fifty-sixth General Conference Session in 1995, church administration released a Statement of Abuse and Family Violence to the press. A statement is a good first step, however, there is much to do in terms of translating intentions and beliefs into action. What do churches actually do when domestic violence occurs? I do not know an extensive answer to this question, but I have firsthand knowledge about a tragic situation in one Adventist church that may be the norm rather than the exception.

This incident happened in a community with a well-established Adventist church. Five years ago on May 9, in a rural Midwestern town, an emergency room physician was arrested on charges of solicitation for murder. He had tried to hire someone to kill his wife—the worst kind of domestic violence. He had six children. He and his wife were members of no particular church, although he had been raised an Adventist. The local Adventist church was well aware of the situation because the man's parents were lifelong members of the Church when the story hit the local media.

The nearby Baptist church also tuned into this news, which was significant in this small rural setting. The day after the story ran, members from the Baptist church set down six bags of groceries and two hundred dollars on the woman's kitchen table. Down the road, the pastor of the Adventist church suggested to the parents that the offender needed a copy of Ellen White's

particularly within the pastorate. The results of our study in the North Pacific Union point to a pressing need for immediate and decisive church-level intervention.

It's time that the Church moved from a position that denies social problems among our members to dealing with them with proactive primary prevention. Primary prevention refers to activities that target whole populations, such as vaccination of all children against communicable diseases.

Based on information gathered in our study, we believe that many approaches are needed to help hurting church members and promote emotional health. With this knowledge, the team has developed a multifaceted approach that addresses the issue of domestic abuse within the Seventh-day Adventist Church. Table 4 (page 54) suggests a variety of strategies for church members to become involved in strengthening our families and providing healing ministries for hurting people.

Abuse prevention is the best option for the long-term emotional health of congregants in our church. One of the greatest stories in history that points to the positive effects of primary prevention and grassroots organization is the March of Dimes. The March of Dimes organizers had a dream: to end polio in their lifetimes. Because there was no cure for polio, prevention was the only solution. In the same way, there is no complete cure once a person has been victimized emotionally and/or physically. Although good professional intervention helps reduce symptoms and promote healing, the emotional scar hovers forever.

Organizers of the March of Dimes started their campaign by placing dime holders in every store checkout



Table 4. Paradigm of Interventions

Type of Intervention	Local Level	Regional or Group Approaches
Messages from the pulpit	Encourage every church in the union to sponsor one Sabbath bi-annually to understanding abuse issues	Offer pastor recognition for sermons that focus on abuse prevention Give an award to the most innovative church for programming targeted toward abuse prevention
Education on healthy relationships	Sponsor workshops for children on healthy relationships Presentations and workshops for adults in the local church—issues include: abuse recovery; healing from childhood issues; healthy parenting; relationship skills	Sponsor regional youth rally events that stress emotional and spiritual health Offer camp meeting presentations Promote regional meetings to address abuse healing issues Include information on emotional health in every Adventist educational textbook
Outreach to women	Identify women who are skilled professional helpers in each congregation Appoint one representative in every church as a women's ministries liaison. Offer training to the women's ministries liaison via regional training sessions	Train women's ministries leaders in each conference on abuse issues
Parenting	Hold church-sponsored parenting workshops	Adopt and promote union-wide healthy parenting models
Self-help	Supply self-help books to churches	Initiate support groups in local congregations
Pastor support	Provide opportunities for each pastor to become knowledgeable about abuse issues	Make a union-wide commitment to ongoing training in abuse issues Have at least one pastor from each region receive extensive training (typically forty hours for certification); compensate the pastor for this designation
Shelter and refuge	Identify local shelters and post numbers in the church restrooms and in the church bulletin Help church members become aware of the union shelter	Support one Adventist domestic violence shelter in each union For each "outside union" client, the other union would contribute to the cost of housing/treating the client

Broadly Based Interventions

Submit best sermon to *Ministry* magazine for publication

Devote Sabbath School lessons at all levels on the connections of emotional and spiritual health

Sponsor a national annual conference that brings together abuse victims and experts in the field for healing, sharing resources, and training

Instill comprehensive procedures to evaluate skills of helpers and women's ministries efforts

Dedicate a General Conference-level parenting advocate

Develop and circulate a reviewed, annotated list of self-help books

Supply guidelines for self-help group interactions

Influence Andrews University Seminary to include mandatory abuse training in its curriculum

Develop evaluation of pastors on knowledge and skills in emotional health and abuse intervention.

Encourage other unions to use and support our Adventist shelter

counter that would accept them. Absurd as it may have seemed at the time, the campaign grew until the entire nation became aware of the problem and committed small sums of change. Because of the dedicated and persistent efforts of a few people who inspired millions, polio is virtually nonexistent in the United States today. Is it absurd to think that this could also be the case with the encouragement of healthy family life within our church today?

One of the most frequent objections I hear when I propose wide-sweeping programs to address abuse issues and strengthen Adventist families is that there is no budget for such programming. What does this objection say about our church's priorities? It is a mystery to me how our church can organize literally millions of members, empowering a well-known Adventist evangelist to warn people about the Three Horns and the Mark of the Beast, and not have a budget for helping hurting people in our congregations.

Our churches make it a priority to invest in equipment and structural revisions so that certain well-worn messages can be flashed on screens by satellites from thousands of miles away to people all over the world, but we can't seem to fund practical ways to help hurting people in our own families and congregations.

If our only response to an abusive act in our church or community is to present an offender with a copy of *Steps to Christ*, then it may be time to broaden our set of responses. However, I believe that by prioritizing documented, existing needs in our church, we can, should, and must respond with the same precision and forethought we put forth in our evangelistic outreach activities.

It is my prayer that the Adventist Church and its members will take the initiative and become icons of peace and healing to hurting and broken people—not just in our own homes and congregations, but also in our communities and around the world.

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