

Faith and Domestic Violence

Stories

Below are a few stories illustrating the intersection of faith and domestic violence. These stories have been told to Safe Havens staff members over the past 25 years.

Please note that names and identifying aspects of the stories have been changed to maintain confidentiality.

If you have a story that you would like to share, or would like to speak with a staff member at Safe Havens, please contact us at 617-654-1820.

While working at a domestic violence shelter, Anne Marie Hunter heard many women speak of their faith. One woman said, "I told my pastor 27 years ago. He told me to pray harder. Now I have calluses on my knees and my husband still beats me." Another woman said, "I turned the other cheek, and turned the other cheek, until I ran out of faces."

Karynn's Story

After "Karynn" left a four-year, abusive marriage, her priest called her at work to ask her to come meet with him. Karynn assumed that he had heard about her situation through other members of the church. While she dreaded explaining her circumstances to the priest and the tremendous effort it would take for her to do so, Karynn knew that she needed the support of her church and faith community. She did not know that her priest had already spoken to her husband. When Karynn entered his office, the priest accused her of abandoning her marriage. He said that her husband had repented and was at that moment in the church praying for her return. Despite her best efforts at explanation, Karynn's priest accused her of being "selfish and egotistical." The priest continued to speak of her duty to her husband, her responsibility to forgive, and her husband's religious conversion. However, Karynn felt that it was too dangerous to return home. After all, this was the man who had recently attempted to get access to her bank account without her approval, had broken into her apartment, and used her friends and family against her. She knew her husband would go to any extreme to get her back. When Karynn refused to "forgive and forget," the priest ended the interview by telling Karynn that she "must not be a Christian because she did not believe in the power of the Holy Spirit to change people." Karynn felt as though "God had turned God's back on her."

The faith community is uniquely placed to improve access to services and to provide critical prevention, earlier intervention, accountability, and long-term social change in order to lessen the impact of domestic violence on families and youth. However, faith community leaders are not always prepared to respond. One victim said after a Safe Havens training, "I'm glad you're doing this work. My mother went to our pastor for help many years ago. He told her to pray harder, but nothing changed. Now maybe some other girl won't spend eight years of her life being raped, like I did."

Cindy's Story

A victim of domestic violence telephoned Safe Havens for help. "Cindy" is a new Christian in an evangelical church. She has a long history of abuse and married her present husband because he was a church member. Cindy believed that church members do not abuse their wives. Cindy has a 7-year-old daughter and a 2-year-old son. Cindy's husband beat her most violently when she was pregnant with her son. There is also ongoing sexual abuse. Cindy's husband was arrested and jailed recently because he was choking her. This incident occurred in front of the children. The son is now mimicking his father's abusive behavior, and Cindy's daughter has also been severely affected. Like many domestic violence victims, Cindy has been isolated from her family and friends.

Cindy says that she really wants to leave, but her church says, "No Divorce!" Her pastor told her, "keep praying," but Cindy says, "my knees are going to wear out, and nothing is changing." Cindy also feels sorry for her husband and terribly guilty. Her pastor preached a sermon at church about forgiveness. He warned the congregants not to get counseling because "God can take care of it." Her husband, who heard the sermon, used it to make Cindy stop seeing her counselor. The pastor also recommended a book to Cindy called The Power of a Praying Wife. The pastor said that if Cindy is earnest and sincere, her prayers will change her husband's abusive behavior.

Meredith is a Jewish woman who turned to her faith community for help with her marriage. Meredith had a long history of psychological and financial abuse, but recently the abuse had turned physical. Meredith felt it was her job to create a peaceful home, so she tried harder to make her husband happy. Sometimes, she wondered if she were imagining the abuse. However, after being hit and pushed down the stairs, Meredith realized there might be something more. She went to her Rabbi because she didn't know where else to turn. Her Rabbi sympathized with Meredith and suggested that perhaps there was something more she could do—save a little more money, better anticipate her husband's needs, keep the house cleaner...The Rabbi suggested that he could speak with Meredith's husband if she thought it would help. Meredith is still grappling with her faith as a barrier to the safety she deserves.