


10 Ways Every Church Ought to Combat Sexual Violence & Domestic Abuse



KYNDALL RAE ROTH AUS | APRIL 4, 2016

Recently some colleagues of mine and I hosted a four-part series on Baylor University's campus for survivors of sexual assault and their advocates. We created a space for lament, then silence, next anger, and finally hope. We acknowledged in each service that everyone's pace of healing is unique, and that the stages of healing are never linear.

It was the first time many of us had ever experienced an intentional space crafted to address the anger we feel about these injustices and violations. It was one of the rare moments when religious leaders acknowledged publically in a liturgical context the cultural and institutional silence surrounding sexual violence.

The rarity of what we created strikes me as a sad failure of the church. When I think back over my long history as an active part of the church, I cannot remember a single instance when I heard a sermon on rape, aside from the ones I have preached myself.

It occurs to me that perhaps not all pastors realize that around one quarter of the women in their congregations have been (often silent) victims of sexual or interpersonal violence/abuse. Some of the men in their congregations have been victims too. Maybe the pastors who are aware of the horrifying statistics simply do not know what to do about it. I have compiled a list of concrete, easy things every pastor and/or church can (and ought) to do.

1. Every time (and I do mean every *time*) you preach or teach on marriage, divorce or relationships, always include a section where you acknowledge publicly that some people do need to leave a relationship for their own safety or the safety of their children. I'm serious. Never talk about marriage or divorce again without that public caveat, even if it feels a little out of place. Maybe it is only one sentence in your whole sermon or Bible study lesson, but that one sentence could save someone's life.

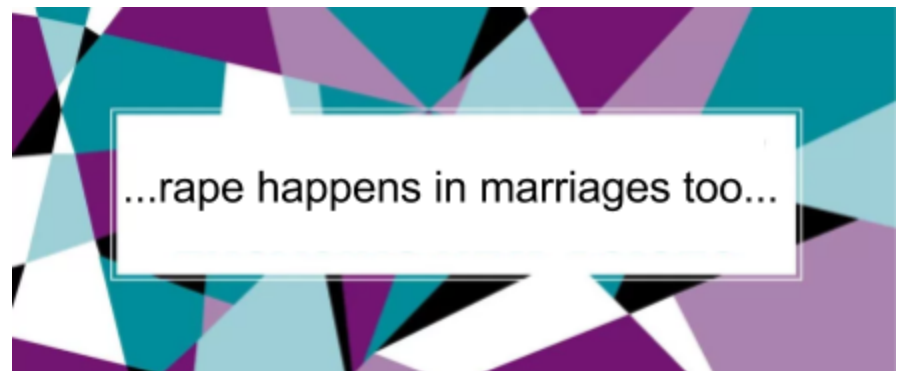
Do you know how many people stay in severely abusive situations because they've never heard their pastor say it was OK to leave? When you talk about forgiving your spouse, they might hear you saying that they have to keep being beaten and accept it. Please, be clearer. If some other person in your congregation pushes back at you for saying divorce is an option, just take the heat and do not budge. It's not your life that's in danger. Let your words make someone else uncomfortable if it could save a life.

2. Name violence and assault in your prayers. Make it a habit to pray for healing for survivors and to pray for violence to cease. We have resources, prayers and litanies available [on the website](#) we have created for this purpose. Feel free to borrow whatever is fitting for your own context. (strongwomenwrite.wordpress.com)

3. Preach about rape. Address sexual violence from the pulpit, and do it more than once. It's not like you don't have any biblical material for it. Also, if you have young children in the service, you might consider planning ahead so that they have somewhere else to go that particular morning rather than the regular worship service. If you do not know where to begin to preach about rape, you can [visit our website](#) for an example.

4. Educate your church about violence and abuse. Require everyone who works with children and youth, whether they are paid or volunteer, to complete child abuse prevention training before they can work with the children. [Darkness to Light](#) has a good program if you're looking for one.

5. Talk to your youth about consent. This is an absolute *must*, even if you are teaching abstinence until marriage. For



one thing, rape happens in marriages, too, and secondly, you cannot explain the sacred nature of sex without acknowledging that it is not sacred unless both persons consent. Make sure both boys and girls are taught that consent is never negotiable. Kids often learn about sex from social interactions with peers and from pornography, neither of which are likely to teach about consent, so make sure you teach it.

6. Share your pulpit with women. It is not only important that women get opportunities to preach and the church receive opportunities to hear their voices — having women in leadership *is* one of the ways we combat violence against women,

by demonstrating in public that women are more than property, more than bodies. They are intellect and soul and so much more.

7. When talking to someone with a troubled marriage, *do not* assume marriage counseling is always a good recommendation. This is really important! Studies show that marriage counseling can actually increase the risk of danger for a victim. When in doubt, recommend individual therapy, and do your best to refer friends and parishioners to therapists who are trained to recognize signs of abuse. There is plenty of information out there about why couples counseling is not recommended when abuse is present. Be informed. (Read [here](#) and [here](#).)

8. Support the victim/survivor, and believe them. This is crucial. Always respond to an abuse story with belief. The percentage of false accusations is small, and you can do a lot of psychological damage to a victim by casting doubt on their story. You should never, ever be the judge of whether a victim ought to go back to their perpetrator. Never. That is never your job. No matter how sincere you think a perpetrator's apologies and confessions are, you *do not* know if he (or she) is telling the truth, or if that partner is safe.

If someone tells you they are considering leaving their marriage or relationship, listen before you judge. Always assume your own ignorance; after all, it's not your relationship, and you have no idea what really goes on behind closed doors or in the middle of the night. Never assume you know that a marriage is supposed to work out, or that God wants a couple to stay together. Sometimes Christians are so afraid of condoning divorce that we uphold marriage to the detriment of someone's safety. Keep in mind that abuse can be very well hidden, and it can happen in the homes you least expect.

Do not tell an abused person what to do. She (or he) needs to be empowered to make decisions, and if you attempt to parent them or instruct them, you are asking them to continue being passive. The best thing you can do is remind someone who is a victim that they are a *survivor*, that they are smart and strong and have the wisdom to know what to do to keep themselves safe. Also, a survivor knows their abuser best and often understands intimately what may escalate the violence. You may not realize that your ideas for how to cope or escape may in fact increase the risk of immediate danger.

Finally, be appalled at the behavior of a perpetrator. Do not be appalled at the survivor for staying or for leaving, or for any reason. Do what you can to shift shame away from the survivor. Keep in mind the survivor is the expert on their own life, not you. You are no better or wiser for not having experienced abuse; you're just lucky and less experienced. Trust her (or him).

9. Have resources readily available. Make sure church leaders and staff know the number to the rape crisis line and the abuse hotline. (National Sexual Assault Hotline: 800.656.HOPE (4673); National Domestic Abuse Hotline: 1-800-799-7233) Consider leaving pamphlets in restrooms, as the restroom may be the only place she/he is safely away from their abuser.

10. Do something active in your community to support survivors. Raise money for an advocacy center, donate clothes to an abuse shelter, hold a prayer vigil for survivors.

Out of these 10, which ones is your church currently doing? Can you rate yourself honestly, and name where you need to improve? Of course, these are not the only ways to combat interpersonal violence. I attempted to confine the list to actions that

are simple and easy to implement. What are efforts you or your church have made to combat sexual violence and domestic abuse in your own contexts? I encourage you to score your congregation 1-10.

Original article featured in [Baptist News Global](#) on April 4, 2016.

Additional resources:

[Darkness to Light](http://www.d2l.org) - www.d2l.org

[National Domestic Violence Hotline](http://1.800.977.7233) - 1.800.977.7233

[National Resource Center on Domestic Violence](http://www.nrcdv.org) - www.nrcdv.org

[National Sexual Violence Resource Center](http://www.nsvrc.org) - www.nsvrc.org

[Rape, Abuse, and Incest National Network \(RAINN\)](http://www.rainn.org) - www.rainn.org

[Strong Women Write](http://strongwomenwrite.wordpress.com) - strongwomenwrite.wordpress.com

[The Duluth Model](http://www.theduluthmodel.org) - www.theduluthmodel.org

Stories from #7:

<http://www.fcadv.org/sites/default/files/8Couples%20Counseling%20and%20DV.pdf>

<http://www.thehotline.org/2014/08/why-we-dont-recommend-couples-counseling-for-abusive-relationships/>

