

KENTUCKY COUNCIL OF CHURCHES  
Policy Statement on Domestic Violence  
Adopted by the 43rd Annual Assembly, October 24, 1990

It is not enemies who taunt me—  
    I could bear that:  
it is not adversaries who deal insolently with me—  
    I could hide from them.  
But it is you, my equal,  
    my companion, my familiar friend,  
With whom I keep pleasant company.  
PS. 55:12-14a, NRSV

The Psalmist captures the feelings of many victims of domestic violence: the pain of being betrayed and injured by a loved one.

Basically, there are three kinds of domestic violence, violence against children, violence against partners, and violence against the elderly. This violence can be physical, sexual, or emotional. Any such violence has long-lasting and devastating effects on the victims; for example, many victims are unable to leave a violent relationship because of their economic dependence upon their batterers.

We, the Kentucky Council of Churches, deplore all kinds of domestic violence, proclaim the worth of each person as a child of God, created in the image of God, and affirm the right of each person to be safe from attacks (verbal and physical) by family members.

In I Cor. 6:19-20, Paul reminds us of the sacredness of the human body:

Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you,  
which you have from God, and that you are not your own? For you were bought  
with a price; therefore glorify God in your body. (NRSV)

The Christian tradition does not advocate or excuse domestic violence. We confess, however, that churches have too often misused scripture to justify, condone, and ignore physical and sexual violence against women and children. Although some men are battered by women and many elderly men are abused, the vast majority of abused adults are women.

One scripture that is commonly used to justify the beating of children is Proverbs 13:24: “Those who spare the rod hate their children, but those who love them are diligent to discipline them.” (NRSV) (Often misquoted “Spare the rod and spoil the child.”) This verse must not be construed to support beating children; the rod referred to is the rod used by shepherds to guide and direct the sheep and to protect the sheep from wild animals, never to beat the sheep (cf Psalm 23:4b: “...your rod and your staff--they comfort me” NRSV). The proverb is an exhortation to parents to discipline their children to guide them and lead them in the right way; it does not give parents permission to beat their children.

The writer of Ephesians cautions: “And, fathers, do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord.” (NRSV) Although children who are beaten often feel they have done something to deserve such treatment, certainly few things can anger a child like being abused by a parent.

Perhaps the most commonly cited passage to support wife abuse is Ephesians 5:22-23: “Wives, be subject to your husbands, as you are to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife just as Christ is the head of the church...” These verses do not advocate the domination of wives by husbands. Rather they provide a model for the way men are to relate to women; the way Christ relates to the Church, being a servant, giving himself up for his followers, never threatening, abusing, coercing, hitting, or intimidating anyone. The passage goes on: “Husbands, love your

wives, just as Christ loved the church..." No man who takes that verse seriously could ever abuse his partner. This is re-emphasized in Col. 3:19: "Husbands, love your wives and never treat them harshly." (NRSV)

Intimate relationships are intended by God to be mutually responsible and respectful:

The husband should give to his wife her conjugal rights, and likewise the wife to her husband. For the wife does not have authority over her own body, but the husband does; likewise the husband does not have authority over his own body, but the wife does. (I Cor. 7:3-4, NRSV)

What Paul had in mind was not that one partner forcing the other to engage in sexual activity, but two persons in a mutual relationship of respect, choice, and regard for one another.

The incidence of elder abuse is increasing. Scripture exhorts us to honor our mothers and fathers (Ex. 20:12). Honor does not include physical harm, threats of harm, forced isolation, deprivation of adequate medical attention, over-medication, or financial exploitation. And yet such abuses occur at an alarming rate. In 1986, over one million elderly persons (one of every twenty-five) reported having been abused. [Mary Jo Quinn and Susan Tomita, Elder Abuse and Neglect.]

The responsibility for the elderly does not fall exclusively to the family; in fact, the entire community is warned against abusing those who cannot defend themselves:

You shall not wrong or oppress a resident alien, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt. You shall not abuse any widow or orphan. If you do abuse them, when they cry out to me, I will surely heed their cry..." (Ex. 22:21-23, NRSV)

THEREFORE, AS THE KENTUCKY COUNCIL OF CHURCHES;

We call on all pastors and other church people to break the silence about domestic violence through preaching, education, and advocacy.

We exhort churches to help break the cycle of abuse by sponsoring self-help groups, opening safe-houses, studying the issues of violence, financially supporting services to families in crisis and agencies which respond to domestic violence, and advocating legislation to prevent abuse and to provide services to victims and rehabilitation to perpetrators. We appeal to churches to emphasize a ministry of healing and to work toward a renewal of family life which enhances the value of all family members, especially those most vulnerable (specifically women, children, the elderly and persons with disabilities).

We encourage our legislators and other public officials to initiate and to work for policies which can provide increased economic opportunities which can lead to economic equality for women, adequate funding for shelters and victim assistance, legal protection from batterers, and mandatory treatment for those persons convicted of domestic violence.

We urge all manifestations of the legal system to take this issue seriously and to treat it a violent crime rather than as "a family matter." We encourage families in crisis to seek professional help. We urge all church members to work toward a just society which discourages (1) all types of violence, (2) oppressive institutions, (3) media portrayals which degrade women, and (4) violence in television programming.

We celebrate God's gift of intimacy, the image of God in each person, the inherent right of each person to health, wholeness, and safety, and we commit ourselves to working toward the elimination of domestic violence.