



ANSWERING THE CALL: FAITH LEADERS RESPOND TO ELDER ABUSE

BY REV. DR. ANNE MARIE HUNTER, DIRECTOR

After the death of her husband, Louise called Pastor Thompson to make arrangements for the funeral. Louise and George had been members of the parish for many years; in his younger days, George had served on the Trustees, while Louise was a regular in the choir and helped to teach Vacation Bible School. Pastor Thompson arrived, and was quick to offer his heartfelt condolences.

Louise was sad, but she was also relieved. The years of emotional, verbal, and physical abuse were over. While others saw George and Louise as a model couple, George was a different man behind closed doors. The abuse escalated after he retired and he and Louise were home together more often. Now, with George gone, Louise turned to Pastor Thompson and for the first time told him what life was really like with George.

There are many forms of elder abuse; the “domestic violence grown old” that Louise was subjected to is one. Research

suggests that 10% of older adults in the U.S. are victims of elder abuse, and for older adults with dementia, that figure jumps to 47%. Elder abuse includes “physical, sexual or psychological abuse, as well as neglect, abandonment, and financial exploitation . . . that occurs in any setting (e.g., home, community, or facility), either in a relationship where there is an expectation of trust and/or when an older person is targeted based on age or disability.” Both men and women are affected regardless of their education, ethnicity, faith, socioeconomic status, sexual orientation, physical ability, language, or country of origin. The hard reality is that most abusers are spouses, intimate partners, or family members, and most abuse happens in the home. Older adults who are abused are three times more likely to die prematurely than their non-abused peers.

Louise is not alone in turning to her faith leader for help. A 2003 study found that “older women would seek help from a place of worship if they experienced abuse.” A 2008 study of victims of elder abuse found that, “Respondents, especially minorities, often indicated that their ‘first stop’ would be a member of the clergy if they were to discuss their domestic violence with anyone.” The recently released Elder Justice Roadmap, which provides strategic guidance in the field of elder abuse, confirms the critically important role that faith leaders (clergy and lay) can play.

Why are faith leaders so important? It turns out that only 1 in 24 cases of elder abuse is ever reported to official agencies such as Adult Protective Services. Many, many victims, just like Louise, don’t or can’t tell anyone. The Elder Justice Roadmap comments, “Individuals who do not specialize and are not trained in elder abuse issues (e.g., police officers, bank tellers, letter carriers, or clergy) may be the only ones in a position to notice that abuse may be occurring . . . They are potential allies whose involvement is critical to an informed approach to prevention, detection, reporting, and response.” For Louise, who had suffered in

silence for 50 years, it was a tremendous relief to be able to talk to Pastor Thompson honestly.

America is aging dramatically, with the population of adults over 65 projected to expand to about 72.1 million (19%) by 2030. The United Methodist Church's ability to respond to the needs of older victims of abuse is vitally important. Faith leaders (clergy and lay) who visit older adults in homes, hospitals, and nursing homes might notice when there is a sudden change in behavior or spending patterns, unexplained injuries, or other "red flags" of abuse. We can look for abuse that might otherwise go unnoticed or unreported, and we can help older adults get the services and support they need to live in safety. A new IMA World Health/Sojourners study found that 80% of Protestant pastors would help their congregants with abuse if they had the training and resources to do so.

A good place to start is with Safe Havens Interfaith Partnership Against Domestic Violence, an agency founded in 1991 by a United Methodist pastor, given its first seed money by the General Board of Global Ministries, and supported by the New England Conference. Safe Havens has recently partnered with the National Clearinghouse on Abuse in Later Life (NCALL) on groundbreaking resources called "Where Faith and Safety Meet." The resources provide information about what elder abuse is, how to recognize "red flags" and warning signs, safety planning, referrals, and what to do if you believe someone may be a victim. There's even a beautiful bookmark that raises awareness.

Elder abuse is a complex problem that will require "a coordinated, multidisciplinary, multi-agency, and multi-system response." You can begin to build a coordinated response in your community by getting to know local services such as sexual and domestic violence service providers, the aging network (Area Agencies on Aging or

Councils on Aging), and Adult Protective Services.

As a faith leader, older victims of abuse may turn to you for help. You know the community, are well respected and trusted, and can encourage victims to focus on safety and seek and accept services. Sexual and domestic violence agencies, the aging network, and Adult Protective Services bring additional expertise, services, and resources to the table. Together we can respond to the needs of older victims of abuse more effectively.

You can access the Where Faith and Safety Meet resources (and download them for free) from Safe Havens' website at www.interfaithpartners.org. Or, you can contact the Safe Havens office at 617-951-3980 or info@interfaithpartners.org to order printed copies. Order a handful of the bookmarks, and make them available in your congregation!

Fortunately for Louise, Pastor Thompson received training on abuse from his local domestic violence agency. He had also read Safe Havens' Where Faith and Safety Meet resources about elder abuse. He listened compassionately, and he told Louise that the abuse was not her fault. He reassured Louise that God was with her and would not want her to be abused. He also found an older woman's support group run by a Council on Aging in a neighboring town, and made sure Louise had a way to get there.

Over several years, Louise healed. Her life without abuse is happy. She enjoys her grandchildren and great-grandchildren, her church family, and her knitting. Like Louise, all older victims deserve a safe, effective, and collaborative response that can help them find hope and healing.

Elder abuse is "a problem with solutions." With education and resources, faith leaders can answer the call and become part of the solution.



Anne Marie Hunter is an ordained Elder in the United Methodist Church. She received her M.Div. from Harvard University in 1986 and her Ph.D. in Sociology of Religion from Drew University in 1991. She has worked for two battered women's service groups and has written and taught about domestic violence and faith for more than 25 years. Her work on elder abuse began in 2008. She is currently appointed by Bishop Sudarshana Devadhar of the New England Conference to direct Safe Havens.

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