Hearts and Hands
Piecing Together Faith and Safety
for Rural Victims of Sexual and Domestic Violence

A GUIDE FOR SERVICE PROVIDERS:
REACHING OUT TO RURAL FAITH-BASED ORGANIZATIONS REGARDING DOMESTIC AND SEXUAL VIOLENCE
Religious affiliation is significant for many Americans; 78.4% identify as Christian, 1.7% Jewish, 0.7% Buddhist, 0.6% Muslim, 0.4% Hindu, 2.8% other faiths (including Unitarian Universalist, New Age, and Native American), and 16.1% unaffiliated.\(^1\)

In rural areas, faith communities can be even more significant community organizations. Charles W. Fluharty, President and CEO of the Rural Policy Research Institute, comments, “If I look at rural America today I would really argue that the church is one of the few anchor institutions that is left . . . .”\(^2\) Rural faith communities are often vibrant centers of community life.

In March, April, and May 2010, Safe Havens conducted focused phone conversations with 32 OVW-funded rural sexual assault and/or domestic violence program staff representing 16 different service agencies in 12 states. Their comments confirm the importance of faith community outreach and collaboration. One rural advocate commented, “The faith community can be huge in addressing domestic [and sexual] violence.” Another noted, “There are churches everywhere here. The religion section in the newspaper lists many churches. The faith community’s presence is huge.”

Additional phone conversations with rural faith leaders in September and October 2010 were also revealing. One pastor said that after he attended an event sponsored by his local domestic and sexual violence service provider, he realized that he was, “doing a whole lot of things completely wrong.” With time, he has become a strong advocate for victims and survivors. He says of the service agency: “It’s a partnership. We need one another. I really needed their information.”

Because faith-based organizations are so central to rural communities, faith community outreach and collaboration are critical. Faith-based organizations are also central to immigrant, refugee, and ethnic, racial, and religious minority communities. Reaching these underserved communities within the rural setting is another strong reason for service providers to collaborate with local faith communities. In addition, older women are more likely to be faith-involved and to turn to their faith leaders for help when facing abuse.\(^3\) Because the U.S. population is aging in general, and rural communities are aging even faster than the national average, this is another compelling reason for rural domestic and sexual violence service providers to collaborate with faith-based organizations.

Rural faith communities and leaders are already being called upon to respond to violence against women. The Georgia Commission on Family Violence’s 2009 Fatality Review comments, “Victims, survivors, and surviving family members consistently turn to their faith communities for support and safety.”\(^4\)
Tragically, faith leaders often have not received the training, skills, and resources they need to respond to sexual and domestic violence safely and effectively. As a result, victim safety may be compromised because faith leaders are unaware of the potential seriousness of the situation, unfamiliar with local services, or unable to provide an appropriate response. In addition, faith leaders may simply be stretched too thin, or overwhelmed by the complexities of responding to the needs of perpetrator, victim/survivor, and other family members. Also, faith leaders are often called upon to give advice. This long-established tradition is counterproductive in the face of a victim’s need for non-judgmental, non-directive support.

While difficult for all faith leaders, responding safely to sexual and domestic violence may be especially problematic for rural faith leaders because they are often:

- geographically isolated,
- working full-time jobs as well as leading the congregation,
- serving two or three congregations at the same time,
- confronting the issues of an aging and in some locations declining community.

By reaching out to faith leaders through collaborative partnerships offering training and resources, rural service providers can help faith leaders access the training, skills, and resources they need to respond safely and effectively to victims. By building bridges of understanding and referral, service providers and faith leaders can improve access to services. And by working with these important community gatekeepers, service providers can strengthen a multidisciplinary, coherent, collaborative community response to rural domestic and sexual violence that supports prevention and intervention and reaches everyone, including older victims and underserved communities.

Cross-training between service providers and faith communities can help sexual and domestic violence service agencies understand and serve their communities more effectively. In addition, strong partnerships with local faith-based organizations can provide service agencies with critical community connections and credibility that increase visibility and community support. When asked about his church’s involvement as their local domestic and sexual violence service agency was getting started, one Episcopal priest commented, “We lent them our credibility, our networks, and our connections in the community.”
The most important reason for faith community outreach, however, has to do with survivors and victims themselves. For many women (particularly older women and women in underserved communities) faith is a critical resource, a pillar of identity and community, and an essential element in decision-making and healing. For these women, faith cannot be “checked at the door.” Work with rural faith communities is essential to meet the needs of victims and survivors.

Outreach to religious communities can be time and labor intensive. There is tremendous diversity within faith communities, and a broad spectrum of faiths and denominations. In addition, each rural community is different, with its own norms and traditions. Also, different faith communities and faith leaders are in different places along the continuum of understanding sexual and domestic violence. The outreach process must be tailored to meet these individual needs.

Outreach may take the form of phone calls, letters with information about sexual and domestic violence, follow up after community education events (such as a “Day of Remembrance”), site visits, responses to phone inquiries about your work, or a brief handout that explains your services.

Members of your staff or volunteers who are involved in faith communities can also provide avenues for outreach. The issues of sexual and domestic violence are often difficult for people in faith-based communities to hear. It can be an effective strategy to map out your organization's web of connections. Find out who among your agency board, staff, and volunteers participate in faith-based communities. Then, assign these folks as community liaisons to your organization. Outreach starts simply: bringing some cards or brochures to the church pancake breakfast, or integrating some thoughts about domestic and sexual assault into a committee meeting. Look for common values. Many people do social justice work based on messages from their faith traditions. Build on these! For example, Jewish communities discuss liberation at Passover. Find ways to connect that message to victims who may be trying to liberate themselves from a violent relationship. Please see Safe Havens’ “Before You Start,” “The First Visit,” and other checklists and resources for more detailed information (www.interfaithpartners.org).

In this document, we have listed some of the outreach challenges you may encounter, and some possible strategies for overcoming these challenges.

In addition, Safe Havens is here to help you. Please contact us by phone (1-617-951-3980) or by email (info@interfaithpartners.org) if you have ideas you’d like to discuss, successes or challenges to share, a model that works, or just need to “talk it through.”
If you encounter this outreach challenge …

**Time Constraints**
Like service providers, rural faith leaders are extremely busy. They must address the many needs of the people in their congregations. They are first and foremost the spiritual leader, but they are often also the CEO, strategic planner, and financial manager. Many rural faith leaders serve more than one congregation, or work full-time jobs in addition to their duties within the congregation. Some may be geographically isolated, and/or deeply immersed in the concerns of their communities.

… here are some strategies that may be helpful.

Reassure faith leaders that you know that they are stretched thin. Pledge to honor their time. If appropriate, start and end every meeting on time. Assure them that once they are part of a community-wide effort to respond to sexual and domestic violence, their role will be more clearly and narrowly defined. They will be able to rely on other community services to take on much of what they might otherwise have done themselves. In the end, a team approach will save time and lives.

Express how desperately faith-based leadership is needed on this critical issue. Faith communities are often the first place that sexual and domestic violence survivors turn for help.

Acknowledge that faith leaders are on the front lines, and that you would like to make that easier by providing supportive and easy-to-use tools, training, and resources.

Encourage a pro-active rather than a re-active stance that will allow the groundwork to be built for a more effective, less crisis-driven response. Before a member of the faith community asks for help in a crisis, the faith leader can learn more and gather resources. Acknowledge the time required but also the benefits to victims of a trusting relationship between faith communities and service providers. Offer to help them with resources and training.
If you encounter this outreach challenge …

**Over-Commitment**

Often, faith leaders and congregations are involved in many community issues. They may also be providing aid and relief in far-flung communities around the world. Although agreeing that sexual and domestic violence are important issues, they may not feel that they have the energy and time to become involved.

... here are some strategies that may be helpful.

Honor the congregation’s visionary work and commitment. Connect that work to efforts to end domestic and sexual violence. For example, if the congregation is deeply committed to ending homelessness or poverty, point out that there is a direct link between poverty and sexual and domestic violence for many women. If the congregation is engaged in peace and justice initiatives, point out that sexual and domestic violence is a peace and justice issue that affects our homes and communities on a daily basis. If the congregation works to strengthen families, point out that sexual and domestic violence undermine and destroy families and communities.
If you encounter this outreach challenge …

Minimizing
The shame that is an intrinsic part of sexual and domestic violence often silences victims and survivors. In addition, many victims would not use the ugly language needed to describe what happened when speaking with their faith leader. And, because they lack sexual and domestic violence training, faith leaders may not yet have developed the ability to “read between the lines” when victims speak about their experiences. As a result, they may think that sexual and domestic violence are not serious or widespread problems.

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Be able to cite compelling and meaningful statistics or “head-snapping facts.” For example, “we know that there are currently [fill in your local number] restraining orders (orders for protection) in our community,” or “a sexual assault occurs in the U.S. every 2 minutes.” If reports of domestic or sexual violence have increased in your area over the last few years, this too can be compelling. Any incident that is covered in the media can also provide an opening for discussion or training.

Know your local statistics.

In addition, a personal story from a survivor may help faith leaders understand emotionally and intellectually the physical, psychological, and spiritual impact and prevalence of sexual and domestic violence. This may happen as part of an introductory training facilitated by a service provider, or may be available through a video presentation.

April (Sexual Assault Awareness Month) and October (Domestic Violence Awareness Month) may also provide opportunities for faith community engagement. Perhaps the faith community could host a community vigil, hold a special service or “Day of Remembrance,” or invite someone from your agency to speak during the service and hold a 1- to 2-hour question and answer session after the service. Perhaps the faith leaders in your community could designate a particular week during these months when they pledge to incorporate sexual and domestic violence in some way in the worship service.
If you encounter this outreach challenge …

**Distancing**
Sometimes, faith leaders are aware that sexual and domestic violence are important issues, but they haven’t made the connection to their own congregations. Or, like the rest of us, they fall prey to the impulse to distance themselves from victims. So they may say, “This isn’t happening here/in my congregation!” or “I’ve never heard anyone in my congregation talk about this.”

… here are some strategies that may be helpful.

Acknowledge the long history of silencing both within the wider culture and within faith communities. Acknowledge that sexual and domestic violence are crimes that cause victims to feel shame, and that often victims are too ashamed to disclose. Until the ice is broken within the congregation, many victims and survivors will not feel safe coming forward. Many faith leaders have heard disclosures only after they break the silence in a public way, receive training, or in some way indicate that they are open to talk about these issues.

Affirm that domestic and sexual violence affect people of all races, cultures, faiths, classes, physical abilities, sexual orientations, ages, etc. However, it is important to acknowledge that racial and ethnic minority women are more likely to experience sexual assault.6

Acknowledge how much victims and survivors need the opportunity to tell their story in their own words, and to be believed, respected, and supported. This is often a first step toward healing. Listening with support and empathy to a victim’s experience is an important role for members and leaders of faith communities.

Affirm that victims and survivors report that they’d like to talk to their faith leaders about sexual and domestic violence. However, they may fear they won’t be believed, fear repercussions from the perpetrator, be embarrassed or too ashamed, have a mental or physical condition that makes disclosure difficult, fear judgment, or be unready, unwilling, or unable to make changes. Survivors need faith leaders to take the first step by talking about these issues themselves.

Sometimes people want to distance themselves from these issues due to their own unexplored histories of violence. Acknowledge this possibility and offer your services in order to open the door to disclosure and healing.
If you encounter this outreach challenge …

Distrust
Faith leaders sometimes fear that service providers may not honor marriages and families, may encourage divorce, may interfere in families, or may overlook essential ethical considerations.

… here are some strategies that may be helpful.

Commit yourself and your agency to the long-term work of relationship and trust building. Attend faith community events when appropriate. Listen respectfully and learn all you can about the congregations in your community. Consult with faith leaders whenever possible.

Reassure faith leaders that domestic and sexual violence advocates do not tell victims what to do. Rather, advocates prioritize safety and provide options and resources.

Acknowledge that when sexual and domestic violence occurs within an intimate relationship, survivors often don’t want the relationship to end, they just want the violence to stop. Early professional intervention is the best hope for a healthy, happy relationship.

Acknowledge that sometimes an abuser will not change his or her abusive behavior, even after batterers’ intervention and much work. In these cases, victims and survivors of domestic violence or sexual violence within a marriage may be faced with the difficult decision to leave the relationship for their own safety and for the safety and wellbeing of their children. In this case, victims need support, the opportunity to mourn the loss of the relationship, and help on the journey toward healing.

Children are traumatized by witnessing domestic abuse. With continued exposure to the abuse, these children may be at risk to abuse drugs and alcohol, commit a violent crime, or become abusers or victims themselves. Sexual violence is also deeply traumatizing to children. As those who nurture children, faith communities must be particularly concerned about and responsive to the affects of violence on the lives of children. In many states, clergy are legally mandated to report child abuse. Know your state laws, and help faith leaders provide safe, effective intervention.
Encourage faith leaders to understand sexual violence, even within a marriage, as a crime. When a crime has been committed, accountability is an important first step in individual and community safety and healing, and is the foundation of justice.

Inform faith leaders that 73% of sexual assaults are perpetrated by a non-stranger (38% of rapists are a friend or acquaintance, 28% are or were an intimate partner, 7% are a relative). Also, note that “college age women are four times more likely to be sexually assaulted.” Help faith leaders understand the physical, emotional, and spiritual impact of sexual violence, whether perpetrated by a family member, spouse, friend, date, or stranger. See www.rainn.org for more information.

Discuss safety and its importance to families, children, and youth. Try to find common ground. Perhaps both your agency and the congregation would agree on values such as safety, justice, or respect for all.

If you are invited to provide training, offer to preview the outline, videos, or other resources with the faith leader. Discuss any concerns that the faith leader may have.

Acknowledge the difficulties that faith leaders and service providers have encountered in the past. Commit to working through difficulties that arise. Listen carefully and try to understand the concerns raised by faith leaders from within their faith and cultural context. However, continue to gently and respectfully affirm that you will remain victim-centered, and you will not compromise safety. When you and a faith leader disagree, try to explain your position through the lens of victim safety or the effect on the victim.

Note that the earlier perpetrators are reported and referred for services, the more likely they will be to change. Also, because perpetrators often have more than one victim, disclosure and accountability now will mean fewer future victims.

Note that earlier detection and intervention are always better for victims.
If you encounter this outreach challenge …

Concerns about Family Integrity
Rural congregations typically include extended families across several generations. Because they solemnize marriages, celebrate anniversaries, help to welcome, teach, and shape the next generation, perform funerals, and are in other ways involved, faith leaders are concerned about and invested in the integrity of families and relationships. At times, this can become a concern for the public unity of the family without due consideration for the private reality.

In addition, many faiths and denominations have a highly developed theology about and sacramental understanding of marriage. This may also increase the weight put on maintaining family integrity.

… here are some strategies that may be helpful.

Encourage faith leaders to understand rape and sexual violence as a crime. Know and be prepared to explain your state’s statute regarding rape and sexual violence within marriage. Victims of domestic violence may also experience sexual violence that remains unreported and may or may not be included in their request for a restraining order. Sometimes, pregnancy may result from a sexual assault by a husband or intimate partner, which creates further complications. When a crime has been committed, accountability is an important step in safety, healing, and justice.

Inform faith leaders that 73% of sexual assaults are perpetrated by someone the victim knows (38% of perpetrators are a friend or acquaintance, 28% are or were an intimate partner, 7% are a relative).9 Also, note that “college age women are four times more likely to be sexually assaulted.”10 Help faith leaders understand the physical, emotional, and spiritual impact of sexual violence whether perpetrated by a family member, spouse, friend, date, or stranger. See www.rainn.org for more information.

Note that the person who uses violence in a relationship to maintain power and control breaks the covenant of marriage, not the person who seeks safety or help.

Talk about the long-term impact of domestic and sexual violence on children. Teach faith leaders that exposure to either may have serious and lasting negative effects on children, including higher risk of drug and alcohol involvement, violent crimes, suicide, or becoming a victim or perpetrator. These really are crimes that continue “from generation to generation.”

Affirm that without professional intervention, domestic violence will escalate in frequency and severity over time.
If you encounter this outreach challenge …

Legal Issues
In some states, clergy are mandated reporters of abuse of children and dependent and older adults. However, reporting guidelines and protocols are sometimes poorly defined or confusing, and many clergy have not received training. Clergy wonder how to do the right thing.

… here are some strategies that may be helpful.

Laws differ by state. Learn and help to educate about local laws regarding faith leaders as mandated reporters of abuse of a child and/or a disabled or older adult. See www.childwelfare.gov (search under “state-specific resources”) for more information.

Some states do not have mandated reporting statutes that apply to clergy.

Make sure that faith leaders in your area know that domestic violence perpetrated against a competent adult is not usually covered under mandatory reporting laws.

Wherever domestic violence is present, faith leaders should be alert for both sexual and physical violence perpetrated against children living in the home.

Reporting may be complicated. There is significant potential for safety risks and increased trauma for family members. Offer to provide support to or partner with faith-based leaders as they respond to a victim or survivor. Be available to discuss the difficult issues and nuances that arise regarding safety and reporting.

Be prepared to answer any questions faith leaders may have.

Offer to help. Be available to hear about situations (with identities disguised) and provide your professional opinion.

Help faith leaders focus on the victim’s needs with regard to safety and reporting.
If you encounter this outreach challenge …

Confidentiality
Many faith leaders have not received training about confidentiality. In addition, congregations often encourage open sharing of personal problems so that congregants can pray for and/or support one another. Congregants may be less individualistic and more community-focused than people in the wider culture. From this viewpoint, the importance of confidentiality may not be immediately apparent.

… here are some strategies that may be helpful.

Be prepared with a clear and concise definition of confidentiality. Stress the importance of confidentiality as the cornerstone of victim safety. Explain why confidentiality is critical to domestic and sexual violence victims and survivors.

Share the confidentiality guidelines you use as a place for faith leaders to begin to develop their own guidelines around confidentiality and sexual and domestic violence. Encourage faith leaders to disclose the limits of confidentiality (for example, situations in which they are a mandated reporter) to congregants at the beginning of every counseling session.

As a general guideline, state that confidentiality should be maintained in all situations UNLESS the faith leader is mandated to report abuse of a child or a dependent or older adult OR someone is going to hurt another person or themselves. Otherwise, information received from a victim or survivor should be disclosed only with that person’s permission.

Be prepared to answer any questions faith leaders may have. Offer to provide support when they are working with a victim or survivor.

Invite faith leaders to further discussion.
If you encounter this outreach challenge …

**Professionalism**
Many faith leaders have been through years of school, been thoroughly screened by ordination committees or by congregational members, have had their calling and theology examined by religious authorities, and have worked diligently to deserve the confidence and respect of their congregants. They have many skills and have learned from experience while serving their congregation(s). Even well-intentioned suggestions may be viewed as disrespectful or unwelcome.

… here are some strategies that may be helpful.

Honor the work and skills of the faith leaders with whom you work. Be willing to learn from them; they often know the community well. Offer to augment the skills and knowledge they already have with your “specialist” perspective. Work toward partnerships. Tell the faith leaders how much you need them, and what they can do to help you do your job more effectively and to keep community members safer.

Ask faith leaders with whom you have worked to become advocates with other faith leaders. What faith leaders can’t hear from service providers, they may be able to hear from their colleagues.

Invite faith leaders to train faith leaders.

Ask the faith leaders you are working with to recommend colleagues who would appreciate an outreach phone call and visit. Ask the faith leaders you are working with to set up the meeting, or to call their colleague and let him or her know that you are going to call.

Let faith leaders know how desperately you need them as partners and supporters in the overall work to end sexual and domestic violence. They have an important and critical role to play that no law enforcement officer or service provider will be able to fill. For many victims, the quest for justice, peace, and healing is ultimately a spiritual journey that requires the engagement of the faith community.

Let faith leaders know that for a faith-based victim or survivor, a faith leader’s involvement is critically important for long-term healing and wellbeing. Work through local faith leader consortiums. Ask to be on the agenda, ask a faith leader with whom you have worked to introduce you, and say a few words about the importance of collaboration with your agency.
If you encounter this outreach challenge …

Past Mistakes
Once we know more about sexual and domestic violence, who among us doesn’t look back on some situation or another and think, “If only I had known . . . .” Faith leaders, too, may be concerned about past responses that, with additional information, they realize may not have been safe or effective.

… here are some strategies that may be helpful.

Affirm that everyone makes mistakes, that there is much to be learned about sexual and domestic violence, and that good advocates and responders are always learning. Be prepared to tell about mistakes that you have made. Affirm that it is OK to have made mistakes in the past, and that we all need ongoing training and support in order to respond safely and more effectively in the future.

Offer to provide technical assistance by phone or email for faith leaders who are responding to a particular case, speaking out in their congregation, or breaking the silence about sexual or domestic violence within the community.

Provide information about a 24/7 hotline that could be available for faith leaders who have questions, need guidance, or want to talk about a case confidentially with the experts.
If you encounter this outreach challenge …

Crisis of Core Beliefs
Sexual and domestic violence are complex issues that may precipitate a crisis of core beliefs. No one wants to believe that bad things can happen to good people, or that seemingly good people can do very bad things. In addition, sexual and domestic violence may test our understandings of core theological issues such as suffering, forgiveness, justice, or hope.

… here are some strategies that may be helpful.

Encourage and support a faith leader discussion group that allows for theological reflection around such issues as forgiveness, divorce, suffering, salvation, repentance, healing, justice, hope, and other questions that victims and survivors encounter. Provide resources where possible.

Acknowledge that domestic and sexual violence challenge our fundamental assumptions that 1) bad things don’t happen to good people, and 2) good people don’t do bad things. Provide time to talk about both these assumptions in light of what we know about perpetrators. Discuss how these assumptions can pressure victims to suffer in silence.

Provide opportunities wherever possible for faith leaders to hear directly from survivors about their experiences and how their experiences affected their faith journeys and their physical, psychological, emotional, and spiritual wellbeing.
If you encounter this outreach challenge …

Disengagement
Faith leaders may be interested and supportive, but not sure how to engage the issues of sexual and domestic violence. They may hesitate, knowing that they are not “experts,” and wanting to make sure that they don’t do the wrong thing or compromise a victim’s safety.

… here are some strategies that may be helpful.

Find a project that can engage faith leaders and your agency. For example, you could decide to develop a brochure about sexual and domestic violence that is specific to a particular faith or denomination. You can include the basic information, and leaders from that faith or denomination can help by selecting scriptures, prayers, or other materials from their tradition that will speak to people in their congregation. Ask them to help you, or to set up a short-term task force within the congregation to help you. Work together to make the resource informative, accessible, and inviting.

Plan an event to introduce the resulting faith-based resource to the congregation and/or community. You and the faith leader can both speak about the importance of your partnership in addressing domestic and sexual violence.

Organize an event for faith leaders (breakfast meeting, working lunch, etc.) that is chaired by the mayor, governor, town councilor, district attorney, or other high-ranking individual and focuses on faith and domestic and sexual violence. Bring in local experts, ask local clergy to speak on the issues, and solicit ideas from faith-based participants about programming or training they would like to receive.
References


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The graphic design in “Hearts and Hands: Piecing Together Faith and Safety for Rural Victims of Sexual and Domestic Violence” is based on quilts. For centuries, American women have pieced together cloth fragments to create quilts that are both useful and beautiful. Often, quilting brought women together to sing, pray, and socialize over busy needles. For these women, “stitched fabrics were often the most eloquent records of their lives.” Through their quilts, women have advocated for everything from suffrage to abolition to temperance, while becoming “not only witnesses to but active agents in important historical change.” We hope that the quilts will inspire all of us to become active agents in ending sexual assault and domestic violence in rural communities across America.


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