Suggestions for Clergy and Faith Community Leaders and Members
Responding to Victims and Survivors of Intimate Partner Abuse

Safety Is the First Priority – Support the Victim’s Right to Safety

• Intimate partner abuse can be dangerous and even deadly. Maintain confidentiality. Do not disclose information to anyone without the survivor’s permission. Never reveal a victim’s location.
• Refer the survivor to appropriate medical services. Offer to go with her/him.
• Refer the survivor to services in your community, including shelters, domestic violence service providers, police, legal advocacy, hotlines, and support groups.
• Respond to faith questions about divorce, forgiveness, suffering, etc. with faith-based resources that condemn violence and oppression and affirm God’s vision of safety and peace for all.
• Remind the victim that abusers do not end the violence on their own. Without professional intervention, the abuse will escalate over time.
• Do not use couples’ counseling if you know or suspect that abuse is present.
• Discuss the impact of the abuse on the children. Children usually see and know more than their parents think. Living in a violent household is a form of abuse with severe effects on children.

Be Victim Centered

• Take the survivor’s story seriously. Allow the victim time to tell the story in his/her own words.
• Bear witness to the abuse and its consequences. Acknowledge that what happened is abusive.
• Stay focused on the survivor. Let him or her set the agenda. Practice active and empathetic listening. Celebrate every small step toward safety and wholeness.

Do Not Blame the Victim

• NO ONE DESERVES TO BE ABUSED. Victims often feel that they have failed as spouse or partner, or that their behavior provokes the abuse. Emphasize that the abuse is the fault of the abuser, not the victim. Conflict is normal, abuse is not.
• Abusers often undermine the victim’s self-esteem. Victims may not believe that they can care for their children, that they are worthy of a better life. Help victims identify their skills and strengths. Celebrate the courage that it took to ask for help. Lift the burden of shame and guilt from the victim.
• Do not use stress, unemployment, alcoholism, a difficult childhood, or anything else as excuses for the abuser’s behavior. There is no excuse for abuse. Affirm that the person who abuses breaks the covenant of marriage, not the person who reaches out for help.
• Recognize that the stigma of domestic abuse falls on the victim, not the abuser.

Do Not Tell the Victim What to Do

• Respect every decision victims and survivors make, and do not make decisions for them. Let them know that your support is available no matter how they decide to handle the situation. It is normal for them to feel confused and to change their minds. Continue to provide support.
• Recognize that victims may feel ambivalent about the abuser. Victims often still love their abusers, who can be good parents and providers. Never speak negatively or angrily about the abuser.