

My husband and I were married for over 10 years. Those years were fraught with physical violence, threats of violence, emotional abuse, spiritual abuse, and various forms of exertion of power and control. Throughout this time we were very involved with our church. Both of us had ministries, my husband on the governing body of the church, and I worked in children's ministries.

Early in our marriage my husband was physically violent with me. I told him I would leave if he ever laid his hands on me again. At that time I tried to contact my pastor; however he wasn't available when I called. After I made the call I began to fear the implications of telling my secret. *What would everyone think? Would they believe me? My husband is Mr. Wonderful, everyone likes him.* Then the personal self doubt started. *Am I making a bigger deal out of this than it really is? Do all husbands act this way?* What I saw as a child was nothing like what I was experiencing. My Dad loved my mother: treating her with love, respect and kindness. I was completely unprepared for the abusive situation I was experiencing. The doubt lingered and festered.

As time passed, the abuse transitioned to verbal and emotional. Name calling, threats of physical violence, breaking of personal property, verbal abuse of the children, neglect, spiritual and financial abuse were all methods that he used to perpetrate domestic violence. For years I lived in fear. My children were young and with the birth of each he got worse. The more perceived responsibility he had, the more abuse I incurred. It got to the point that my eldest started being a target for abuse. That was when I knew I had to make some changes in our lives.

I began meeting with a friend from church and we discussed and prayed about the situation. We prayed for healing of my husband and we prayed for relief for me and my children. During that time I went to my church leadership and explained what was going on and that I needed help. The church leadership decided to involve him in a general bible study and never came to me and ask me how things were going, or if he was improving. They never confronted him or held him accountable for his behavior.

Some time later, I summoned the courage to leave. With the help of a neighbor who I had been confiding in, they kept my husband busy and I literally escaped from the house with my children. Shortly after I left, I contacted an elder from my church to inform him that I had gone. He and my pastor came to my new home and discussed what had been transpiring in our marital home. I poured my heart out to them again. I told them that someone was going to get hurt, that he was out of control, that I was terrified and I wanted out of the home and relationship. After I filed for divorce they came to me and said, "Don't do this. Please go to counseling with him. You don't have biblical grounds for a divorce."

So I rescinded the application for divorce and went to counseling. Counseling with the Christian counselor was grueling. I told her that I had read that in situations of abuse the individuals should be counseled separately. She disagreed. He denied the abuse and I was afraid to say anything. It was a worthless and agonizing exercise with him blaming me for everything wrong in his life. I sat there terrified to speak the truth of the abuse that had transpired. What I did learn from this counseling was that I was a complete doormat and I had allowed that to happen in the name of keeping peace. He said that I was not being a good wife because I didn't submit to his authority. At one point during counseling the pressure was so great to reconcile that I verbalized consideration to moving back into the marital home. When a friend of mine begged me not to do it, I told

him I wasn't ready. The next night he came to my new home and proceeded to assault me, calling me all kinds of names, choking me, throwing me to the ground and beating my head on the floor. When he finally left, I called 911. He went straight to the home of someone on the governing body of the church. I was taken by ambulance to the hospital and church leadership finally convinced him to turn himself in to the police.

We both filed for divorce. Church leadership told me that if I continued to go through with the divorce they would dis-fellowship me from the church, because I did not have biblical grounds for divorce. Then my husband rescinded his filing. After the pressure of church discipline, I rescinded my divorce filings.

He plead guilty to misdemeanor domestic violence charges and court proceedings ensued. My husband didn't come back to the church but he met with people individually to recruit people from church to testify for him in court. He told them I was crazy, belittling me and minimizing his own actions.

I tried to stay at the church for the sake of my children. I kept saying that he broke the covenant by virtue of his abuse, that husbands were suppose to love their wives like Christ loved the church. This fell upon deaf ears. The small group we belonged to decided not to have me involved. Few people spoke to me when I attended church, whether it was because they didn't know what to believe or what to do, I don't know, but I felt ostracized in the place I sought sanctuary. My place of sanctuary became a battle ground. My church repeatedly became a place of revictimization. Clearly, my church and the leadership did not understand the dynamics of domestic violence and how they contributed to its perpetuation.

I was the elephant in the sanctuary that people didn't want to admit was there. I reminded them of the ugliness of the world. Ugliness that made them uncomfortable and didn't fit into there perfect ideation of what Christianity and Christian marriage was about. It was unfathomable that evil lurked amongst them. Couldn't be....it just couldn't be. The thought was "If we ignore it, it will go away". While I wasn't the evil, I was the "it", and eventually I did go away. For my own well being, I had to leave that church behind, one where I had so much history. I fled my home and now I had to flee from my church. My home and my sanctuary were both gone.

I came to the realization that "sanctuary" was not in the building but in my personal relationship with Christ. I came to understand that I was going to go through some time where all (and the best) that I could do was to rely on Christ. It became important for me to take time to heal and tell my story as part of that healing process. I hope that leadership in churches will be open-minded enough to realize they need knowledge regarding the issue of domestic violence. I would like to see church leadership accept that domestic violence is a real problem in faith communities and become responsive to the needs women involved. Women, by virtue of their gender, are not lesser vessels in the eyes of God, just different. Until society values women to the extent they do men, there will be little assistance afforded in these situations. Society has recognized substance abuse as a sickness. Domestic violence is a sickness also, it represents a character flaw. It is not just a person who has a temper. It represents their world view of the purpose and value of women.

Men in the eyes of Christ have a great responsibility to care for their wives. Husbands are to love their wives as Christ loved the church. Christ never abused or belittled

people. Clearly, it is not what he intended for women. Educating church leaders with regard to the realities, prevalence and pathology of domestic violence will help women who are literally trapped in their domestic situation. God did not intend for me or any other women to live in the bondage that is the reality of domestic violence. He intended for women to live a life of freedom to help make the world a better place for all his creation, especially to let his creation know about Christ. By ignoring the reality of some women, churches are devaluing what Christ has made and thereby ignoring their call.