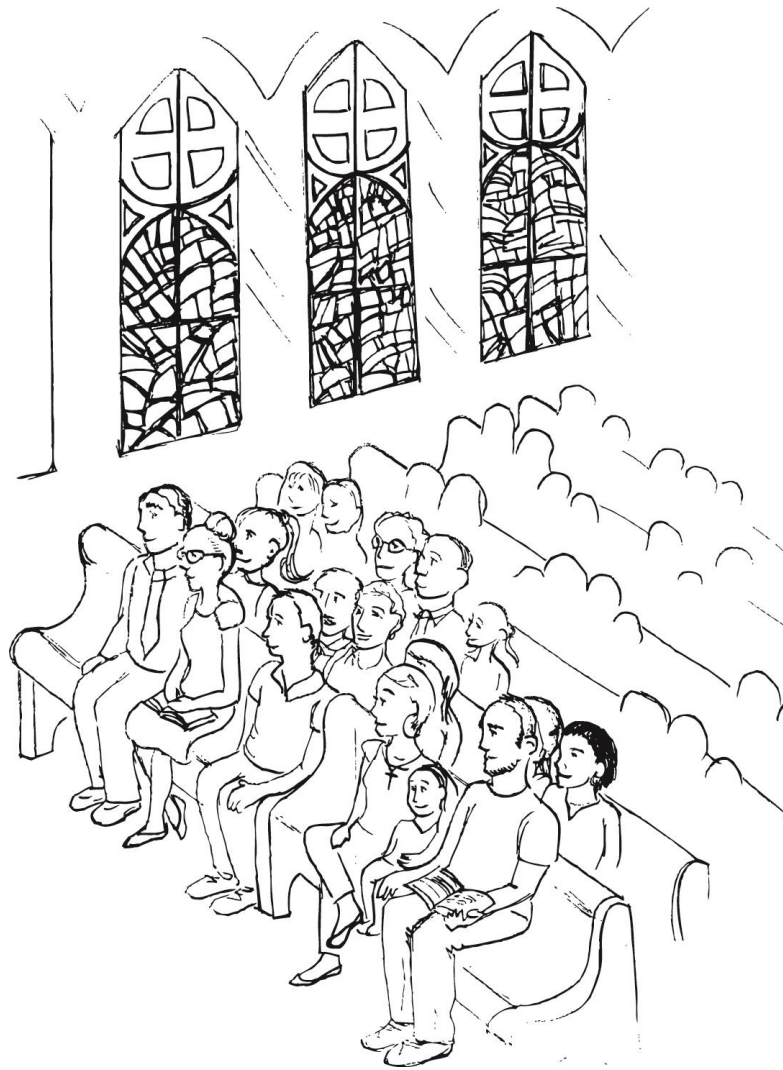


# **BROKEN SILENCE:**

## **A Call for Churches to Speak Out**

*Protestant Pastors Survey on Sexual and Domestic Violence*

June 2014



## Executive Summary

Sexual and domestic violence inflicts deep emotional, physical, and spiritual harm on the individuals who endure it. It also inflicts long-term damage to communities by reinforcing discriminatory social, economic, and political dynamics that disfigure social and familial relationships and rob people of opportunity, safety, and peace.

Curious about the Protestant Christian community's understanding of and response to this violence, [Sojourners](#) and [IMA World Health](#) (on behalf of [WeWillSpeakOut.US](#)) commissioned a survey of Protestant pastors' views on sexual and domestic violence.

The Survey, perhaps the first of its kind in the U.S., reveals an unrealized potential within churches for the prevention of and response to sexual and domestic violence. It begins with awareness: **an overwhelming majority of the faith leaders surveyed (74%) underestimate the level of sexual and domestic violence experienced within their congregations**, leading to infrequent discussions of the issue from the pulpit as well as a lack of appropriate support for victims. Additionally, only 56% of pastors are adequately familiar with local resources that specifically address sexual and domestic violence, creating missed opportunities for victims to access services. And distressingly, the survey also found that even pastors who have handled incidents of violence may not be offering appropriate advice to those who are suffering, potentially doing more harm than good.

Though this Survey showed that churches are currently falling short of their potential, there was encouragement: **81% of pastors said they would take appropriate action to reduce sexual and domestic violence if they had the training and resources to do so**—revealing a great opportunity to turn this uncertain and unprepared group into powerful advocates for prevention, intervention, and healing.

## Introduction

Sexual and domestic violence is entrenched in cultures all around the world. The Bible chronicles the rape of Tamar in 2 Samuel and a woman's brutal rape and dismemberment in Judges 19. Recent stories about women raped and lynched in India, or the use of mass rape as a weapon of war in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, are extreme and horrific examples of violence in our world today. Currently in the U.S., our military and universities are actively seeking solutions to prevent and respond to this violence within their respective institutions.

The prevalence of sexual and domestic violence is continually studied and documented. In 2013, the World Health Organization classified violence against women as a "significant public health problem" and reported that, overall, 35% of women worldwide have experienced either physical and/or sexual intimate partner violence or non-partner sexual violence;<sup>1</sup> previously, a study released in 2011 by the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention had already produced similar findings in the U.S., while noting that along with one in three U.S. women, as many as one in four U.S. men will experience intimate partner violence as well.<sup>2</sup> The nature of the violence, however, differs. The Bureau of Justice Statistics' National Crime Victimization Survey clarifies that, in cases of intimate partner violence in 2008, the rates of rape or sexual assaults against females and males were 1.4 and 0.3 per 1,000 persons age 12 or older, respectively. In the same year, the rate of intimate partner victimizations for females was 4.3 victimizations per 1,000 females age 12 or older. The equivalent rate of intimate partner violence against males was 0.8 victimizations per 1,000 males age 12 or older. And in fatal intimate partner violence, in 2007, females made up 70% of victims killed by an intimate partner, a proportion that has changed very little since 1993.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> World Health Organization. *Global and regional estimates of violence against women prevalence and health effects of intimate partner violence and non-partner sexual violence*. 2013

<sup>2</sup> U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. *National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey*. 2010

<sup>3</sup> U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, Bureau of Justice Statistics, "Selected Findings: Female Victims of Violence," September 2009 (NCJ 228356). <http://www.bjs.gov/content/pub/ascii/fvv.txt>

Meanwhile, churches and other houses of worship remain important cultural influencers in the lives of Americans, as nearly 80% of people in the U.S. affiliate with a religion.<sup>4</sup> Because of this widespread influence—and because of the alarmingly high rates of sexual and domestic violence in the U.S.—faith communities’ treatment of sexual and domestic violence is important to examine. The relationship is, indeed, complex. For many women who are religious, one of the first responses to abuse by an intimate partner is to seek help from their pastor or other faith leaders. This first disclosure is critical; research consistently shows that the advice of the first person a victim tells will in large measure determine her next steps.<sup>5</sup> Women who are religious can be especially vulnerable when abused, because they are more likely to place high value on keeping a family intact or to consider separation and divorce as unsatisfactory (or unbiblical) options.<sup>6</sup> Religious women may also have difficulty getting the support they need from their local faith leaders. According to one survey, 95% of church-going women report they have never heard a specific message on abuse preached from the pulpit of their church.<sup>7</sup>

To help better understand how U.S. faith leaders understand and respond to sexual and domestic violence in their congregations, Sojourners and IMA World Health commissioned a survey of Protestant pastors. Sojourners is a national Christian organization that articulates the biblical call to social justice. Since its founding in the 1970s, the organization has been committed to resisting sexism in all its forms, while affirming the integrity and equality of women and men in the church and in the larger world. It has [extensively covered](#) sexual violence within Christian circles and is committed to helping Christians address and reduce domestic violence in society. Through its Women and Girls Leading on Faith and Justice campaign, Sojourners is building a movement of Christians dedicated to advancing the God-given dignity, equality, and leadership abilities of women and girls worldwide. IMA World Health—a faith-based, international health and development organization—is the secretariat of [WeWillSpeakOut.US](#), a movement of diverse faith groups from across the U.S. joining together with other leaders for action and advocacy to end the silence around sexual and domestic violence and make policy and other changes to reduce and eliminate it. WeWillSpeakOut.US is a sister coalition of the [WeWillSpeakOut](#) (global) coalition, which was established in March 2011 at Lambeth Palace in London at the launch of Tearfund’s “[Silent No More](#)” research report. The report highlighted the untapped potential and challenges of the worldwide church to prevent and respond to sexual and domestic violence. The Protestant Pastors Survey on Sexual and Domestic Violence provides crucial data to help mobilize this potential.

## Methodology

The Survey was conducted by [LifeWay Research](#). It consisted of telephone interviews of 1,000 Protestant pastors from May 7-31, 2014. The calling list was randomly drawn from a list of all Protestant churches, mainline and evangelical, in three size categories in the U.S. Up to 10 calls were made to reach a sampled phone number. Each interview was conducted with the senior pastor, minister, or priest of the church called. Responses were weighted to reflect the size and geographic distribution of Protestant churches. The sample provides 95% confidence that the sampling error does not exceed  $\pm 3.1\%$ . Examples of “sexual and domestic violence” provided to respondents included “physical violence, sexual assault, rape, or child sexual abuse.” It did not mention verbal, emotional, psychological, financial, and spiritual abuse—although these are also considered domestic violence.

## Major Findings

### ***Ending sexual and domestic violence is not yet a core message of the Church.***

Based on the number of times they speak to their congregations about sexual or domestic violence each year, the majority of pastors do not consider sexual or domestic violence central to larger religious themes such as strong families, a peaceful society, pursuing holiness, social justice, etc. **Two out of three (65%) pastors speak one time a**

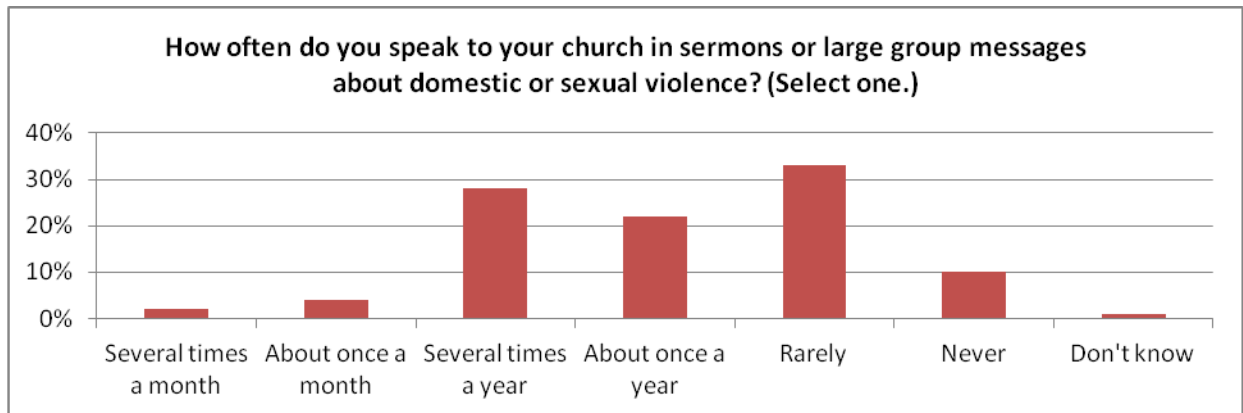
<sup>4</sup> Pew Research Center’s Forum on Religion & Public Life, 2012. <http://www.pewforum.org/2012/10/09/nones-on-the-rise/#who-are-the-unaffiliated>

<sup>5</sup> [http://religionanddiversity.ca/media/uploads/projects\\_and\\_results/biblio\\_and\\_case\\_law/strand\\_three\\_violence\\_and\\_religion\\_phase\\_1.pdf](http://religionanddiversity.ca/media/uploads/projects_and_results/biblio_and_case_law/strand_three_violence_and_religion_phase_1.pdf)

<sup>6</sup> Nason-Clark & Clark Kroeger, 2010

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

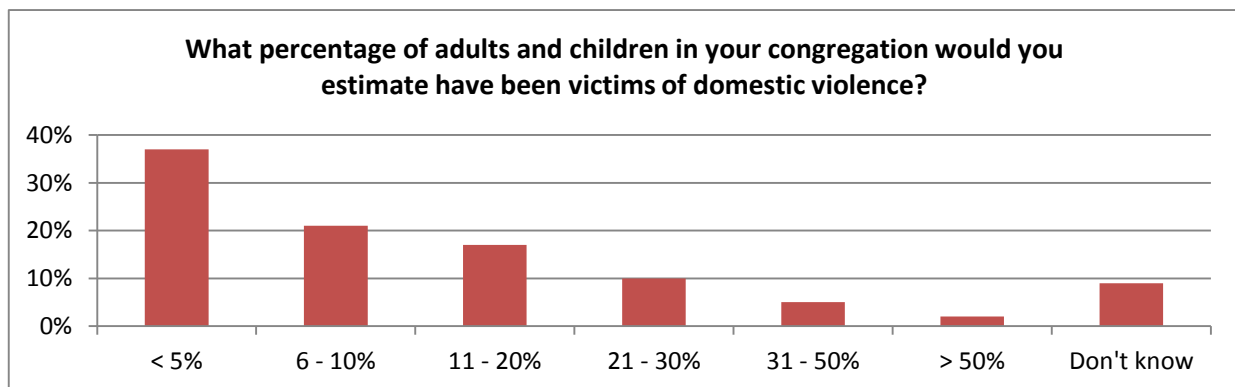
**year or less about the issue.** Twenty-two percent say they speak about it once a year. Thirty-three percent of pastors speak about it “rarely.” **And one in 10 are silent, never speaking to their congregations about this topic.**



***Inadequate awareness of pervasiveness of sexual and domestic violence.***

Why is violence not a common topic of discussion in churches? The Survey suggests the low frequency of discussion is due to pastors’ underestimation of the pervasiveness of sexual and domestic violence in their congregations. Of the pastors who do speak about the topic, 72% do so because they believe sexual and domestic violence is a problem in their *local communities*. Only 25% of pastors speak out because they believe it is a problem *in their congregations*.

Given the consistent finding that one in three women (and one in four men) in the U.S. will experience sexual and physical violence by an intimate partner at some point in their lives—and given that about 70% of Americans say they attend a worship service at least monthly/yearly<sup>8</sup>—pastors’ estimates are very low: 17% estimate 11%-20% of their congregations have been victims of sexual or domestic violence, 21% estimate the number at 6%-10%, and fully 37% of pastors estimate less than 5% of their congregation have been victims of sexual or domestic violence.



***Pastors don't know about critical resources.***

Another challenge is that pastors are not educated about the local resources (e.g. rape crisis or domestic violence centers) available to assist victims and perpetrators in their communities. Only 43% of pastors are familiar enough with sexual and domestic violence resources in their communities: 27% are familiar with resources, while only 16%

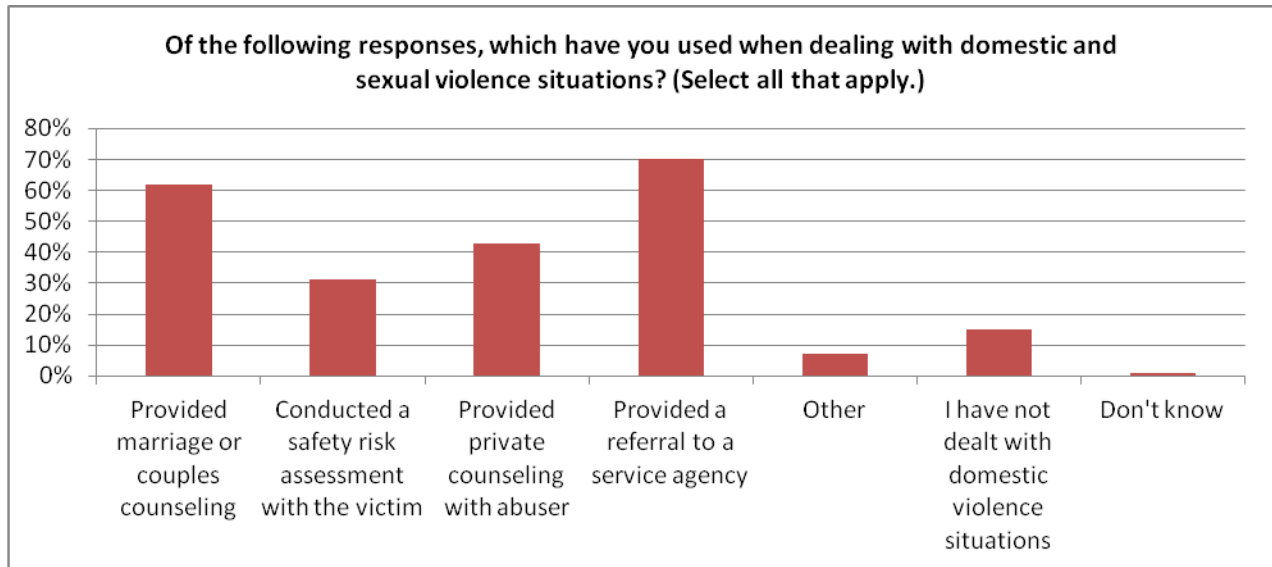
<sup>8</sup> Pew Research Center, 2013. <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2013/09/13/what-surveys-say-about-worship-attendance-and-why-some-stay-home/>

are very familiar; 48% are somewhat familiar. Perhaps most importantly, **8% of pastors are not at all familiar** with sexual and domestic violence resources in their communities.

***Assistance that is provided can be inappropriate.***

The top priority in sexual and domestic violence should be to ensure the immediate safety of victims or potential victims. This philosophy is well understood among anti-violence practitioners and those in the health community, but it may be countercultural for U.S. clergy, especially those who are strongly affiliated with values that view family matters as strictly private, place a high priority on family “stability,” teach an absolute prohibition against divorce, practice “male headship” and submission of women, or who see untrained “counseling” as part of their pastoral duty. As a result, research indicates that abused women who seek help from untrained clergy typically find themselves in a worse situation than before.<sup>9</sup>

The Survey revealed that pastors who have responded to incidents of violence among their flocks indeed may be handling them inappropriately or even harmfully. For example, counseling someone to remain at home with their abusive spouse or partner and “work it out” can potentially lead to devastating consequences for the safety and health of the victim and others in the home. **A large majority (62%) of pastors surveyed say they have responded to sexual or domestic violence by providing couples or marriage counseling.** This is considered a potentially dangerous or even potentially lethal response.<sup>10</sup>

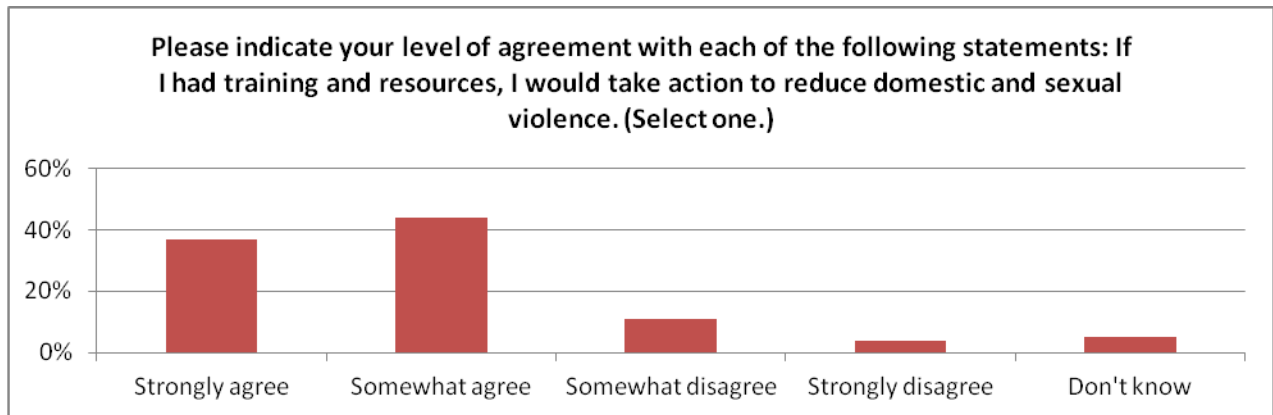


***Good News: Most would do more if they knew more.***

On some level, pastors appear to recognize they have room to know more—and do better—to protect victims of sexual and domestic violence. Encouragingly, eight in 10 pastors say they would take action against sexual violence if they had the training and resources. Thirty-seven percent of pastors “strongly agree” they would take action, while 44% “somewhat agree” they would take action to reduce sexual and domestic violence if they had training and resources.

<sup>9</sup> Skiff et al., “Engaging the Clergy in Addressing the Impact of Partner Violence in their Faith Communities,” *Journal of Spirituality In Mental Health*, 10, no. 2 [2008]: 104

<sup>10</sup> A Policy Statement on Domestic Violence Couples Counseling: <http://www.faithtrustinstitute.org/resources/articles/Policy-Statement-on-DV-Couples-Counseling.pdf>



## Conclusion

Domestic violence is a leading cause of injury and death to women worldwide, and gender violence causes more death and disability among women ages 15 to 44 than cancer, malaria, traffic accidents, or war. **Regrettably, and statistically, the church is not immune to this problem.** Numerous studies suggest that incident rates among active churchgoers are nearly the same as those among the general populace.<sup>11</sup>

As a cultural and social phenomenon, sexual and domestic violence requires social action, including the full force of the legal, regulatory, and judicial systems, as well as the full force of social institutions—including faith communities and houses of worship. **Faith leaders are important actors in social change.** They exercise significant influence within their congregations, in the larger community, and even on the national and international levels. Their churches are symbols of refuge and comfort. These leaders can and should help protect victims of sexual and domestic violence and encourage their congregations to take action to eliminate it within their families, churches, and communities. Faith leaders can be positive and practical examples of how to address domestic and sexual violence, and can also be a moral voice for the entire community and society.

Unfortunately, awareness is low, preparation is inadequate, and critical relationships have not yet been forged. What is clear—and encouraging—is that faith leaders want to do more. Provided with the proper tools and resources, faith leaders are willing to strongly speak out and act to end sexual and domestic violence.

Several organizations around the country have been doing this work for some time. Resources, trainings, and tools for pastors and other faith leaders interested in learning more about preventing and responding to sexual and domestic violence can be found at [www.wewillspeakout.us](http://www.wewillspeakout.us), in “[Naming the Sin](#),” by Michelle D. Bernard (*Sojourners* magazine, December 2013), and “[‘I Believe You’: Sexual Violence and the Church](#),” by Catherine Woodiwiss (*Sojourners*), as well as through our partners at Safe Havens ([www.interfaithpartners.org](http://www.interfaithpartners.org)), The Religion and Violence e-Learning Project ([www.theraveproject.com](http://www.theraveproject.com)), The Spiritual Alliance to Stop Intimate Violence ([www.saiv.org](http://www.saiv.org)), and the FaithTrust Institute ([www.faitrustinstitute.org](http://www.faitrustinstitute.org)).

<sup>11</sup> Nason-Clark and Clark Kroeger, 2010



**Sojourners** is a national Christian organization committed to faith in action for social justice. We seek to inspire hope and build a movement to transform individuals, communities, the church, and the world. With a 40-year history, Sojourners is a nonpartisan leader that convenes, builds alliances among, and mobilizes people of faith, focusing on racial and social justice, life and peace, and environmental stewardship. [www.sojo.net](http://www.sojo.net).



**IMA World Health**, the secretariat and host of WeWillSpeakOut.US, is a faith-based public health and development organization. IMA's mission is to build healthier communities, by collaborating with key partners to serve vulnerable people. [www.imaworldhealth.org](http://www.imaworldhealth.org).



**WeWillSpeakOut.US** is a movement of diverse faith groups from across the US joining together with other leaders for action and advocacy to end the silence around sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV). [www.wewillspkout.us](http://www.wewillspkout.us).

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