

# Parishes take on domestic violence ministry

By HEIDI SCHLUMPF

About seven years ago, Valerie Yokie was serving on the Chicago Archdiocesan Women's Committee, when Cardinal Francis George opened up the meeting to hear the members' concerns and priorities. Yokie raised the issue of domestic violence.

A fellow committee member spoke up and said she had lived for many years with a man who kept a gun under their bed and threatened to kill her and her mother if she left. Another woman said she had stayed in an abusive relationship because of her children, but eventually escaped. A third committee member admitted she also had stayed too long with an abuser, but left when he became so violent she was afraid for her life.

"Everybody kind of sucked air," Yokie remembered. That three of the committee's 18 members shared personal experiences with domestic violence likely meant that another three were remaining silent.

Nearly one in every three U.S. women report having been physically abused by a spouse or boyfriend at some point in her life, according to the National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

That's about the same — or even more — than the number of women who will have an abortion in their lifetime. Yet, compare the church's ministries dedicated to abortion to those dedicated to domestic violence and, sadly, domestic violence ministries are few and far between.

For example, in 2008, the U.S. bishops' Committee for Laity, Marriage,



Family Life and Youth surveyed all 195 dioceses and archdioceses in the U.S. about their domestic violence services or programs: Only 35 responded.

One Chicago priest is trying to change that. Fr. Chuck Dahm, a Dominican well-known for social justice work during his 51 years of priesthood, began a domestic violence outreach in the Latino parish where he had served as pastor for 21 years. Now as the archdiocesan director of Domestic Violence Outreach, he has preached at more than 50 parishes and helped found ministries at more than 40 of them, including St. Raymond de Penafort in the northwest suburb of Mount Prospect, Ill., Yokie's parish.

After that Women's Committee meeting, Yokie invited Dahm to speak at all the Masses. About three

dozen parishioners signed up to get involved and were trained during a one-day retreat. A core group of about eight to 10 now coordinates the parish's ministry, which is three-pronged, focusing on raising awareness, making referrals for services, and working on prevention.

Awareness-raising involves dispelling the myth that domestic violence doesn't happen in middle-class parishes like St. Raymond. The parish marks Domestic Violence Awareness Month every October with purple ribbons around trees and homilies devoted to the topic. The bulletin contains referral information and resources every week, and the prayers of the faithful regularly mention families facing violence.

St. Raymond's committee has worked with the school principal

and the head of teen ministry to include education around domestic violence prevention and healthy relationships.

A trained counselor who was a parishioner and member of the domestic violence committee used to be available for victims, but she got few calls.

“I don’t think we necessarily have fewer incidents of abuse,” Yokie said, citing research that says statistics are consistent across educational, income and ethnic groups. “Perhaps privacy and confidentiality were more on the minds of our parishioners, and they have insurance to go get counseling” so they don’t need free services.

That is not the case at St. Pius V Parish, where Dahm now serves as associate pastor. In the lower-income neighborhood of Pilsen, Ill., the parish has seven full-time counselors who offer individual counseling, support groups and case management for victims of domestic violence and their children — as well as referrals to shelters and programs, often run by Catholic Charities. Called HOPE, the program offers services that are both bilingual and free.

More unusual is St. Pius’ program for abusers who want to change — usually men, since 85 percent of victims are women. “More people are realizing the need to work with perpetrators because otherwise they leave one victim and find another,” said Dahm. “We need to get to men and help them relate to women differently.”

Unfortunately, research isn’t clear on what works with abusers, although an Illinois study found that completing a batterer intervention program reduced the odds of being re-arrested for domestic violence by 63 percent.

But more needs to be done, says Charlie Stoops, dean of Graduate School of Social Work at Dominican

University in River Forest, Ill.

“We should consider approaching men’s domestic violence as a significant behavioral and public health issue, similar to smoking, which requires large-scale, adequately funded prevention and intervention efforts that can be covered by health insurance,” he wrote in a 2014 *New York Times* opinion piece.

Dahm believes men’s abusive behavior comes from their own low self-esteem, which the St. Pius program tries to address in a pastoral, faith-based and culturally sensitive way, but he recognizes that a Catholic program that works with perpetrators is controversial. Most early domestic violence work in the 1970s was done by feminists wary of the Catholic church, which had a history of counseling victims to return to their abusers to preserve their marriages. Dahm says there are still priests today saying the same thing.

After speaking in another Illinois diocese, Dahm heard from a deacon who said he finally realized that by encouraging his sister to stay in her marriage and work it out, he had been contributing to her abuse.

“In Catholic communities, the No. 1 reason women stay is because they think they have to because of the church,” Dahm said. “They don’t want to lose their relationship with God.”

Counteracting the message that abused women must stay married “in good times and in bad” is why domestic violence outreach in the church is so important. Yet Dahm faces a surprising amount of resistance from priests, he says. Although George was supportive, it took two years to get information on domestic violence into the seminary program. “There was no room, and it just wasn’t a high priority,” Dahm said.

Pastors in parishes also are trying to juggle a number of issues and concerns, or they worry that talking

about domestic violence will be perceived as negative or controversial. But the biggest reason Dahm has only visited 56 out of more than 350 parishes in the archdiocese is that priests don’t think abuse happens in their communities.

Ultimately, domestic violence is the result of unequal relationships between men and women, Dahm says. So can the patriarchal Catholic church have any credibility on the issue? In the recently updated pastoral letter “When I Call for Help,” the U.S. bishops admitted that men abuse because they hold a view of women as inferior and believe that men are meant to dominate and control women. The letter calls for “a moral revolution to replace a culture of violence.”

Although domestic violence is mentioned briefly in the working document for the upcoming Synod of Bishops on the family, it focuses more on the trafficking and sexual exploitation of children than abuse between intimate partners. Earlier this summer, Pope Francis said divorce may be “morally necessary” in cases “when it comes to saving the weaker spouse, or young children, from more serious injuries caused by intimidation and violence, by humiliation and exploitation, by lack of involvement and indifference.”

Still, much work — and ministry — remains to be done.

“If we address it from the pulpit, it’s the one time that you have the victims, the perpetrators and the witnesses [the children] hearing the same message,” Yokie says. “I think it’s really important that we’re clear that this is wrong ... that it’s sinful and it breaks the bonds of marriage. A woman doesn’t have to stay in a marriage where she’s being abused.”

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