

Tri-County Batterer Intervention Provider Network Meeting Minutes March 13th, 2012

Attendance: Chris Huffine (Allies in Change), Guruseva Mason, Jen Hopkinson (Clackamas Women's Services), Ron Clark (Agape Church of Christ), Suzi Evans (Choices), Stu Walker (Multnomah County Dept of Community Justice), Samantha Naliboff (VOA Home Free), Robbie Miller (private practice), Wendy Viola (Portland State University), Steve Stewart (Allies in Change), Stacey Womack (ARMS), Shaun Larson (ARMS), Jacquie Pancoast (ChangePoint), Maggie Kirlin (Allies in Change), Linda Castaneda (Manley Interventions), Phil Broyles (Teras Intervention and Counseling), Katherine Stansbury (Turning Points)

Minutes by Wendy Viola, edited by Chris Huffine

Topic: Men's Use of Religion in Groups: How do we handle men who draw on religion to justify or explain their abusive behavior in groups?

One cultural challenge in working with abusive men is that some will use their religious beliefs to justify their abusive behavior or will be spiritually abusive. If the facilitators are not familiar with that group member's religion, they may struggle to challenge those beliefs and may fear becoming disrespectful if they do. They also may miss ways he is being spiritually abusive. Given that none of us can know well every religion, how do we address this within our groups?

Should we even be talking about religion within our groups? Some men will bring it up on their own. For some providers, religion tends to come up in the context of self-care and one aspect of that which is leading a spiritual life. Other providers tend not to go very far with that to avoid religion becoming a justification of abuse.

One of the more common pro-abuse religious beliefs evoked by men is that men are to be the heads of their household. Some providers may directly challenge this belief as wrong. However, other providers argue that there isn't necessarily anything wrong with men being the heads of household, so long as it's not in a controlling or power-over way. Patriarchy can and is often used to enforce power and control. However, if people are making their own, consenting, informed decisions to live in a patriarchal relationship, there's nothing inherently wrong with that. The key is non-coerced informed consent. Provided that is in place many behaviors that might otherwise be seen as abusive (e.g., sado-masochistic sexual practices, one person keeping another person on an allowance) are actually not.

Religion often comes up in Spanish-speaking groups in particular, and it has been observed that many men become more involved in their religious communities as a means of support as their relationships end. One provider knows of a Spanish-speaking

church in Canby that is very close and exclusive. There's reason to believe that a lot of the teachings are quite sexist, and the church's exclusivity is perceived as a barrier to working with members of that congregation. For example, a man spoke quite a bit about this church in his intake, but has not talked about it in group. An idea to get him talking may involve having a meeting about religion.

Some men intentionally choose specific congregations that embrace more patriarchal and abusive values, and we should consider men's choices of institutions. Men should be held accountable for choosing the sect of their chosen religion that fosters beliefs that led to their perpetration of abuse. (i.e., consider why you are choosing this particular interpretation of your faith tradition, which gets you this result?). One way to address this is to ask men to identify other interpretations of their faith, or exact passages that other sects of their faith interpret differently. Some have found that people join particular institutions based on their childhood experiences and how closely the leaders remind them of their parents. People tend to think about God or religious leaders in the contexts of relationships that have been important to them (i.e., women who have been trafficked tend to think of God as a pimp). Groups could also tap into this issue by asking about the structure (i.e. strict vs. flexible) of men's families of origin. There have also been men who attempt to change institutions to make them more controlling.

This is an example of a concern that certain specific practitioners/congregations of any religion may use the religious beliefs to support abuse and control. What to do if you have the concern that a man is involved with such a group? This issue is reminiscent of the issue of negative peer associations, and could also be addressed through a late-stage conversation, such as the following: "Now that you're starting to see that you have had power and control issues and you have been abusive, let's start to talk about who you are surrounded by," but this conversation would have to occur once the man has already bought into the program.

The rate of abuse tends to be about equal across religious groups, and across sects of Christianity. There's a perception that certain doctrines reinforce abuse, but abusive people will use religious texts to justify abuse, and peaceful people will use religious texts to justify peace. Many religious communities in the US are trying to stay off the radar because they're still minorities and relatively vulnerable. This is not the case with the Evangelical community, which is publishing more explicitly sexist texts.

Conservative Evangelicals tend to be highly fear-driven, specifically, fear of women and the feminist movement, as they pose a threat to male Evangelicals' current state of privilege. The 2 biggest issues that Evangelical Christianity has taken on are anti-abortion and anti-homosexuality, both of which are issues that heterosexual men are incredibly afraid of. This issue may be better framed in terms of "what do you feel entitled to do when you feel afraid" which is something that men, like all human beings, experience.

Instead, it's a matter of what you feel entitled to do when you experience fear. When men feel like they're losing something that they thought was a right—that's entitlement.

Men who are more religious will often get very abusive in the name of saving their marriage. When women threaten to file for divorce, church members get more on the backs of women who are filing for divorce than the abusive men they're divorcing. Another issue is how we confront men around their religious beliefs in a way that holds them accountable, but doesn't make him feel mistreated (because if he feels mistreated, he's more likely to take it out on his family)

It's common for men who are going through divorces and separations to return to their roots and return to their churches to look for a support system—returning to the church at that point is like looking for a father figure to fix their marriages. When they realize that the church isn't providing the specific kind of support that they're looking for, they tend to withdraw again.

It often seems that there are 1 or 2 men in a group at a time who seem to hide behind their religion, which the other men tend to perceive as “preachy” and men tend to avoid those individuals. Sometimes other men in the group react to preachy men because of the content or the way in which the information is presented (some men just don't like being preached to). These “preachy” men fall into 3 groups, and it's important to identify which group these men belong to:

1. those with more of a power orientation who want to talk down to other men in the group
2. personality disordered men who are using religion to further their agenda—it's more than just religion going on with them
3. the men who are genuinely starting to examine and wrestle with their values. These men are genuinely open to a dialogue, so these are the men that you *don't* want to shut down.

Some responses to men's claims that “I'm going to church now so I'm all better!” include throwing it out to the group for their reactions, asking: “how come? How do you think that's helping?” These comments typically come from men who are earlier on in the program so it doesn't have to be taken very seriously. Attending church can also be an attempt at impression management.

Jewish and Muslim communities place an emphasis on making amends and repentance, whereas the Christian community emphasizes more confession and forgiveness. This also plays out culturally: in the US, making amends is less a part of our culture, as opposed to other countries. Some men use religion to avoid making amends and accountability (“God has forgiven me, why can't you?”). This is also manifested in our justice system—you're sentenced to 5 years and you do your time, but there's no attention paid to restoration. We have to make a distinction between retribution and

restoration. The idea that you can forgive and be forgiven *and* be restored is not often manifested in our justice system.

When you're unfamiliar with a religion's teachings, it's easy to collude with religious-based justifications, as you don't always know when men are misconstruing religious texts if you don't know them very well. It can be particularly challenging to work with men who know the bible inside and out. One way to address this is to identify religious leaders who have non-abusive values and biblical characters who led with peace, love, and humility.

If men have their clergy do counseling, it's recommended to get a signed release at intake so that providers can contact the clergy member, many of whom believe that couples counseling is the right way to go. It can be very helpful for providers to be a resource to clergy members who are providing counseling to couples in which abuse is occurring. There are some training in the community, particularly for leaders in the Christian community, but there are particular individuals that providers trust to work with perpetrators. It might be difficult to get this information from men initially, so it may be a matter of knowing the right questions to ask to find out if men are getting counseling from others at their religious institutions.

Many men also attend additional groups offered by religious institutions. Some of these groups are pretty good, but a lot of them are collusive. Attending both BIPs and institution-led "Accountability Groups" can help men recognize that others in their accountability groups aren't actually being accountable. There are some concerns that these institution-led groups are un-doing some of the work that the BIPs are doing. Promise Keepers is one such group that seems to have come and gone. A lot of these outreach programs for men make providers uncomfortable and seem to miss the point—they should be more about genuinely practicing respect instead of stopping making sexist jokes. Whenever you bring groups of men together without any consideration of gender roles and misogyny without any conversation of male privilege and power, it becomes collusion. Merely being silent around those issues can become collusive. There's also the danger that these groups foster a victim stance. We have to acknowledge past victimhood, while still holding men accountable for their own current behavior.

How does this use of religion connect to victim safety? If BIPs can get men to listen to vulnerable people, we can create a safer environment. What are religious communities doing to address DV? To what extent is the congregation going to be supportive of victims' experiences? It's less about what we're doing in the groups, and more about getting the message out to religious communities to address these issues as well. Each of the participants is also attached to a victim, and whether or not the relationship makes it, the hope is that drawing on religion (or anything that helps get through to men) helps foster safety for women. Men who participate in BIPs also return to their faith communities and convey some of the messages that they learned in BIPs.

There are also faith specific issues that contribute to the isolation and abuse of Christian women. They may be more hesitant to use traditional domestic violence victim services out of false perceptions about what occurs (e.g., “I don’t want to go to a support group because they’ll tell me to leave”). There may also be other women within their faith communities who will help make them feel shameful about thinking of leaving. There are some mothers who blame their daughters for being victimized and collude with abusive partners—this might be even stronger in faith-based communities. Thus, they may have communities, but may still be isolated within those communities.

There are men who shut themselves off to groups because the facilitators don’t embody their own religious or cultural identity, and they tend to over-emphasize these cultural differences (i.e. “you don’t understand me because you don’t practice my faith, so I can sit here and nod my head, but I’m going to write off everything you say because I don’t respect you because I don’t respect your religious practices”). There’s also a risk that we overestimate the amount of bearing that faith has on participants’ lives—they may just be spouting off things that they don’t know much about.

Several additional resources were mentioned to help address these concerns. One website is www.CBEinternational.org (Christians for Biblical Equality), a good resource for addressing biblical issues with abusive men. The “Broken Vows” video, from The Faith Trust Institute (<http://www.cpsdv.org/>), addresses how sacred texts have been used to support abusive behavior in the home, and clarify misconceptions about religious teachings. “Courage” is a film about the work that women have been doing in households, which has been screened in groups. The response tends to be that men should step up and take charge of their families, as opposed to acknowledging the work that women have been doing and thanking them for it.

Are there religious leaders in Portland who we know are particularly well-versed in DV issues, to whom we might be able to refer victims to? Ron Clark’s organization, Agape Church of Christ (<http://missionagape.com/>) has developed a resource guide, by religion, which might be helpful. Ron can be reached at rclark@agapecoc.com. It might also be helpful for providers to have some knowledge of these resources so that they don’t have to manage men’s spiritual and religious well-being and can focus on their abuse. The Faith Trust Institute is a wealth of resources, but we don’t quite know which religious leaders in the community are particularly supportive of this movement. It might be helpful to do some outreach to the religious community to develop relationships with leaders so we know individuals to whom to refer both victims and perpetrators. It might be useful to reach out to specific communities (Muslim Education Foundation).

While we don’t have groups for a ton of religious orientations in Portland, we can still refer to books, for example, a 1997 book that holds Christian men highly responsible for their relationships (*Why not Women*).

Stacey Womack brought a hand-out on Abusive Perspectives of a Christian Man and how to counter them with other biblical references which was distributed to those in attendance. It offers biblically based rebuttals to some of the most common biblical passages Christian men use to justify their abuse and control. Contact Stacey at Stacey@armsonline.org for a copy.