

**A PASTORAL LETTER ON DOMESTIC ABUSE**  
**Adopted by the 27<sup>th</sup> General Assembly (June 2007)**  
**Evangelical Presbyterian Church**

*A pastoral letter is intended to shine the light of God's Word broadly on a general area of concern to the Church. Requiring the approval of only one General Assembly, it is not as definitive as a Position Paper which requires the approval of two General Assemblies (including a minimum of one year circulation among the presbyteries). The primary purpose of a pastoral letter is to guide churches within the EPC rather than to identify our positions to the world.*

The stamp of the image and likeness of God sets apart human life as unique, distinctive and profoundly valuable (Genesis 1:26, 27; 9:6; James 3:9). For this reason, God demands that we preserve and protect human life and dignity. Any abuse of human beings is inherently wrong, as it violates this command. Therefore, domestic abuse (which includes spousal, parent/child, sibling and child/parent mistreatment) violates God's will. There is no place for this sin, especially among Christians. However, the disturbing reality that abuse is found even in families claiming the name of Christ concerns the church, and provides the reason for this pastoral letter.

The EPC has previously provided a Position Paper on the Sanctity of Marriage, in which our denomination discussed the nature and character of marriage as a sworn fidelity, a solemn covenant between a man and a woman before God. At the center of this covenant is the principle that in marriage, a man and a woman become one flesh (Genesis 2:24; cf. Matthew 19:5) and so are united in a mutual and comprehensive relationship of nurture for each other (Ephesians 5:28-29).<sup>i</sup>

Any type of marital abuse violates this principle.<sup>ii</sup> In our culture there is a particular danger of domestic abuse by the man.<sup>iii</sup> For this reason, the men in our congregations need to be especially sensitive to this cultural reality,<sup>iv</sup> and what it means for a man to love his wife as Christ loved the church (Ephesians 5:25-27).

Domestic abuse is not limited to physical violence. Verbal, sexual, psychological, emotional or mental attacks are also a violation of the one-flesh principle of marriage.<sup>v</sup> However, these patterns can be complex and ambiguous in their expressions, and so Sessions must be very careful in their fact-finding and assessment of the presence of these forms of abuse. They should be particularly aware of the possibility of manipulation by one or both parties.

The church as a whole and the Session as the leadership of the local church has a pressing responsibility to address the problem of domestic abuse proactively. As the body of Christ, our churches should foster and encourage an environment of openness, honesty and sensitivity in which church members are able to raise significant life struggles with one another, and to seek and receive help, safety and healing. In such an environment, the sin of domestic abuse is truthfully and lovingly confronted, repentance encouraged, and biblical forgiveness, restoration and reconciliation are pursued.

Therefore, Sessions should:

- Ensure that the biblical model of marriage is taught, promoted and celebrated in the church;
- Teach healthy means of conflict resolution in marriage and family relationships;

- Ask whether church leadership is perceived as offering a safe haven for victims of abuse to seek assistance;
- Educate the church leadership on the issues, patterns and evidences of domestic abuse. It is strongly suggested that a qualified Christian (biblically-based) mental health professional address the elders on this issue;
- Intervene in domestic abuse situations, balancing the need for biblical reconciliation and the preservation of the marriage with physical safety and protection;
- Ensure that victims of abuse are heard, respected and directed to the healing grace of Christ. In the case of women victims, other women in the church should be part of the support system;
- Ensure that abusers are heard, confronted in a God-honoring manner (Galatians 6:1), and directed to the mercy and transforming grace of Jesus Christ;
- Know and utilize appropriate resources, agencies and mental health professionals who treat abusers and victims of domestic abuse;
- Be familiar with local and state laws concerning domestic violence. Reporting to law enforcement agencies may be appropriate, or even required in some instances, such as those involving children.

In situations where domestic abuse remains intractable, Sessions must exercise formal judicial discipline for the well-being of the parties involved and of the larger Christian community. The failure of the church to address known cases of domestic abuse, and to protect its members, brings dishonor on Christ and His bride, the Church. Confronting abuse may be difficult and time-consuming, and may be viewed as a distraction from other important matters. However, one of the four marks of a true church is the exercise of Scriptural discipline.<sup>vi</sup> Our willingness to deal with this issue demonstrates our membership in the true Church of Jesus Christ.

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<sup>i</sup> “Scripture teaches that the one-flesh union of marriage constitutes an intellectual, emotional, physical and spiritual unity. ‘So they are no longer two, but one’ (Matthew 19:5-6). When the two become one flesh, the God-created individualities of the husband and wife are not lost; rather they complement and enrich each other. Furthermore, the Apostle Paul demonstrates that this ‘profound mystery’ is analogous to the spiritual relationship between Christ and His church. ‘I am talking about Christ and the Church’ (Ephesians 5:31-33)” (Position Paper on the Sanctity of Marriage).

<sup>ii</sup> “All forms of emotional and physical abuse violate the one-flesh covenantal relationship” (Position Paper on the Sanctity of Marriage).

<sup>iii</sup> Harvard Medical Review, April 2004, which says that 9 of 10 cases of domestic abuse are perpetrated by men on women.

<sup>iv</sup> One study found that “less than three percent of wives in egalitarian marriages had been beaten by their husbands in the previous year. In (so-called) traditional marriages where the husband was dominant, 10.7% of wives had been beaten – a rate of violence more than 300% higher than for egalitarian marriages.” Diana R. Garland, *Family Ministry*, (Downers Grove, Illinois: Intervarsity, 1999), 201. Another study that included over 20,000 married couples produced similar results. Spousal abuse by the husband was 400% higher in traditional marriages. “National Survey on Marital Strength: Executive Summary,” at [www.lifeinnovations.com](http://www.lifeinnovations.com).

<sup>v</sup> “All forms of emotional and physical abuse violate the one-flesh covenantal relationship” (Position Paper on the Sanctity of Marriage).

<sup>vi</sup> Book of Government, 1-5.