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Religious organizations work together to end domestic abuse

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GUEST COLUMNIST

For centuries, religion has been a roadblock for women seeking escape from the brutality in their homes. Through text or teaching, religion has made it virtually impossible at times for women to seek shelter, safety or consider divorce.

Many wife abusers use religion to excuse their behavior through quotes from Scripture or by interpreting teachings such as the one used by an accused wife abuser to justify marital rape. The defendant claimed the Catholic Church had taught him that he had free sexual access to his wife at any time. For him, that meant breaking down her locked door and forcing her to have sex.

On the contrary, in 1992 the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops released the following statement: "As pastors of the Catholic Church in the United States, we state clearly and strongly ... that violence against women, inside or outside the home, is never justified. Violence in any form -- physical, sexual, psychological or verbal -- is sinful."

The statement, reissued in 2004, is a step in the right direction and could be used to support wider public awareness.

In fact, religious leaders and their teachings have the capacity to be abundant resources for battered women or rape victims and those who abuse them. But we must have a clear agenda -- one of safety, healing and justice for the most vulnerable rather than an agenda of no see, no hear, no speak, which protects domestic violence and rape behind the curtain of privacy.

April is National Sexual Violence Prevention Month. On April 5, 42 national religious leaders from various denominations and movements acknowledged that we have been part of the problem and declared that in the future, we will be part of the solution.

On behalf of the signers, Rabbi Elliot Dorff from the University of Judaism in Los Angeles, Imam Mohamed Magid from the Islamic Society of North America, Maj. Marilyn White from the Salvation Army and the National Association of Evangelicals, and I launched The National Declaration by Religious Leaders to Address Violence Against Women.

The declaration will be distributed to battered women's shelters and rape crisis centers in the United States. Shelter residents can scan the names and determine whether their faith group supports them in seeking safety for themselves and their children. We urge more religious groups, including the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, and other individuals and faith-based groups to add their names to the Declaration at www.faithtrustinstitute.org

As religious leaders from very diverse traditions, we rarely agree on anything. But in the National Declaration by Religious Leaders to Address Violence Against Women, we speak with one voice. As religious leaders join with community leaders, we will see ancient roadblocks become resources that save lives and bring healing. And we will eventually see the day when domestic violence and rape are peculiar, rare events in our communities and faith groups rather than the common, everyday tragedies that touch so many lives.

Rev. Dr. Marie Fortune is the founder of FaithTrust Institute, a national organization working to end sexual and domestic violence. She is an ordained pastor in the United Church of Christ.

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