



Churches must serve as 'healing space' in domestic violence, expert says

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By Morgan Jarema

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GRAND RAPIDS -- When it comes to domestic violence, some faith leaders turn to their religious texts to convey to men and women that it's better to destroy the body and spare the soul.

But the Rev. Marie Fortune argues that when the body is destroyed in domestic violence, so too is the soul. And she says it's up to churches to serve as healing spaces.

"For many people, that's still an assumption, that a house of worship is where you go when you need help," Fortune said. "Faith-based communities can and should be supporting efforts to assist battered women, and professionals who are members of faith communities should be more visible, because you are an extension of the ministry."

Fortune spoke Monday at the Prince Conference Center at Calvin College to some 300 faith leaders, social work professionals and domestic violence workers about the link between domestic violence and faith.

The event, titled "Broken Vows, Battered Faith," was sponsored by Safe Haven Ministries, a local Christian domestic crisis organization that offers a shelter as well as advocacy, counseling, legal and other support to women and children who have left the shelter.

Safe Haven also has a church ministry program -- called Raise Hope -- whose mission is to educate the local faith community on how to recognize and respond to domestic violence.

Fortune is considered an expert in the field of domestic abuse, especially as it relates to issues of faith.

In 1977, she founded the Seattle-based Center for the Prevention of Sexual and Domestic Violence, now known as FaithTrust Institute, where she served as executive director until 1999 and now serves as founder and senior analyst.

Fortune said otherwise well-intentioned faith leaders often put victims of domestic abuse in a position of having to choose between their faith -- which either is against divorce or holds that women submit to their husbands -- and their own safety.

Fortune said churches, synagogues and mosques should preach nonviolence in all relationships, and take a more active role when a member is abused by being a resource for shelter, financial support and calling on its other members' professional knowledge.

Fortune's speech resonated with Lynell Bok, who works in the global community outreach department of Calvary Church in Grand Rapids.

Bok has helped other members through crisis situations, but she has firsthand experience with domestic violence -- she said it took going to two churches before she found a group that was willing to listen and help her through the end of her own abusive marriage.

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