

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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**Recent Study of Protestant Pastors Reflects Progress on Sexual and Domestic Violence,  
Demonstrates Ongoing Need for Education and Training Resources**

A recent study of Protestant pastors in the United States reflects increased awareness about sexual and domestic violence and the resources available to address these abuses, yet emphasizes the need for further education on how best to respond to cases of abuse among congregants.

The study, *Broken Silence: A Call for Churches to Speak Out*, revealed that most pastors surveyed underestimate the extent to which sexual and domestic violence affect members of their congregations. While intimate partner violence affects one in three women (and one in four men) at some point in their lives, the survey indicates that only 56% of pastors speak out about domestic and sexual violence and only 25% do so because they believe it is a problem in their congregations. About 74% of pastors surveyed estimate that no more than one in five of their congregants have been victimized. As a result, most pastors are not raising these issues with congregants often enough.

FaithTrust Institute founder, Rev. Dr. Marie Fortune, commented on the challenges of disbelief and avoidance she has witnessed during her decades of experience educating and training clergy on abuse issues:

“Faith leaders mistakenly believe that sexual and domestic violence are not issues in their congregations, so they don’t address these problems in Sunday sermons or adult education classes. If they don’t introduce the topic, however, parishioners will not feel safe confiding their experiences of abuse. Because no one comes to them with these

problems, the leaders fail to recognize the harm that community members are suffering. Avoiding the problem of abuse becomes a self-perpetuating cycle.”

Fortune thus encourages faith leaders to integrate attention to sexual and domestic violence into the regular course of their ongoing ministry programs.

The study reflected progress since the early days of the anti-rape movement, when FaithTrust Institute first began working on these issues. Today, the vast majority of pastors are aware that domestic violence has affected at least some members of their congregation. This situation is much improved from the late 1970s, when most pastors and parishioners did not broach the subjects of sexual and domestic violence in their congregations.

Ninety-two percent of the pastors surveyed had some familiarity with local resources to address sexual and domestic violence, such as a rape crisis hotline. This represents a substantial improvement over the situation FaithTrust encountered when it began and discovered that about 70% of local clergy in the Seattle area were not aware of *a single resource* to assist victims of sexual or domestic violence.

Despite these signs of progress, many pastors still need education and training in how to respond appropriately to situations of domestic violence. One of the survey’s most distressing findings was that 62% of pastors provided “marriage or couples counseling” to couples in abusive relationships. This is problematic and potentially dangerous, as couples counseling is not a viable therapeutic tool for use in violent family relationships. Pastors need specialized education and training to learn how to respond to situations of domestic violence in a way that does not increase the risk to the victim.

The study also acknowledged that some clergy mishandle cases of domestic violence based on harmful interpretations of religious texts or teachings, leaving those who sought their help worse off.

FaithTrust Institute founder, Rev. Dr. Marie Fortune, remarked:

“Our mission at FaithTrust Institute has always been to ensure that faith leaders are part of the solution to domestic and sexual violence, and not part of the problem. This means helping leaders to draw on the resources of their religious traditions to overcome situations of abuse, rather than allowing those traditions to become roadblocks to victims’ escape.

We are glad to see greater awareness about these abuses among faith leaders and pleased to have new allies like Sojourners taking up the cause. FaithTrust Institute remains committed to providing education and training resources to prepare pastors to respond well when confronted with situations of abuse.”

As the study acknowledged, there is still significant “unrealized potential within churches for the prevention of and response to sexual and domestic violence.”

FaithTrust Institute is a national, multifaith, multicultural training and education organization with global reach, working to end sexual and domestic violence. Founded in 1977 by Rev. Dr. Marie M. Fortune, FaithTrust Institute provides faith communities and advocates with the tools and knowledge they need to address the faith and cultural issues related to abuse. FaithTrust Institute has worked over the years with evangelical and mainline Protestant leaders, Catholic leaders, and leaders from other religious traditions, including Judaism, Islam, and Buddhism. Among the resources FaithTrust has developed is a comprehensive training curriculum, [“Pastoral Care for Domestic Violence: Case Studies for Clergy,”](#) an interactive program designed to prepare clergy to respond effectively to situations of domestic violence.

The study, [\*Broken Silence: A Call for Churches to Speak Out\*](#), released in June 2014, was commissioned by Sojourners and IMA World Health, on behalf of WeWillSpeakOut.US. Conducted by LifeWay Research, the survey involved interviews of 1,000 Protestant pastors, mainline and evangelical.

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