

# Women, Violence, and the Church

## A Service of Confession and Healing

Prior to service, recruit four (4) worship leaders who will alternate sections to read. In the section containing stories of women, recruit four (4) voices, preferably survivors who are willing to be part of the service. Candle lighters can be selected from these participants or additional participants can be recruited. Have at least twenty votive candles for lighting. Collect stones to be placed in a basket and used during the service. These will be taken by members of the congregation upon leaving. We have included all that will be said during this service. The bulletins can be more of an outline, with congregational participation pieces included.

### SILENT PRAYER AND MEDITATION

*Every 15 seconds a woman in the US is subjected to violent abuse at the hands of her spouse or intimate partner, for a total of 4-6 million reported incidents per year. O Creator God, help us to change hearts and open minds. Amen. (Statistics from Striking Terror No More, pg. 91)*

### PRELUDE

*(A solo instrument, such as a recorder or flute, playing "When a Poor One" PH #407.)*

### CALL TO WORSHIP

**ALL: We gather today to worship a living God, a God who hears our cries, shares our tears, knows our anger, and is steadfast now and always. We gather today to be in each other's presence as we remember, confess, name and respond to the violence in our lives, in our families, our churches and our communities. Let us walk this way together.** (From *Striking Terror No More*, pg. 89.)

HYMN      "O God, You Are My God"      Presbyterian Hymnal (PH) #198

### INTRODUCTION (Two leaders share)

ONE: Today, we gather for a service of naming. We will name the dimensions and dynamics of the serious problem of violence against women. It is all around us. Violence is the root of many other problems in our society, yet many times the church remains silent. Today, the silence will be broken. We will name the victims of abuse and mourn their lost lives. We will share their stories of loss, pain and alienation through poems and reflections. We will share words of hope from survivors and learn about the process of recovering from the effects of violence. *[Optional, see Appendix: We will name those who are justice-makers in this community.]* We will name the God who is present in and through all our efforts to create lives free from violence.

ONE: With the difficult reality of violence in mind, let us open our hearts to God's call in our midst. We cannot hide from the truth; in fact, knowing the truth, however painful, can set us free to respond with vigor and work for justice in the world that God so loves.

## CALL TO CONFESSION

ONE: Dear Friends, God knows and understands the heart of each one of us. When we confess our sins as a community, we do not usually separate anyone from the whole body, but make our confession as one unit. Today, however, we want to be especially sensitive to the fact that the body of Christ is divided, for some are abused, some are abusers, and some condone the abuse by looking away. As the community of faith, let us join with God and with one another in making our confession before God. (From *Striking Terror No More*, pg. 90)

## PRAYER OF CONFESSION

**ALL: O God, You know our hearts, our minds, our feelings and thoughts. You know the heavy stones that weigh down our spirits. We cry for all that cannot be saved. Comfort us as we mourn the loss of women's lives to violence. Strengthen us as we break the silence, confront evil and cry out for justice. Help us see the chains that bind us and the chains that we place around others. Set us free to walk in the fullness of life that is promised to all people. Let us live into that promise with every moment of our lives. Amen.** (From *Striking Terror No More*, pg. 92)

## ASSURANCE OF PARDON

ONE: Sisters and brothers, hear the good news! There is no sin so large, no shortcoming so great that it can separate us from the love of God. For all who truly desire new life, God offers forgiveness and new opportunities for healing and wholeness in our lives. Accept God's grace and live! (From "Family Ministries and Seniors," Saskatchewan Conference Human Development and Support Committee, Vo. 8, Spring, 1993.)

MEDITATION HYMN "Open My Eyes" (vs. 1)                      Presbyterian Hymnal #324

## INVITATION TO NAMING THE VIOLENCE AMONG US AND WITHIN US

ONE: Many go unnamed, unknown as victims of abuse. Yet we can name some. May God bless the naming of these women.

*Worship Notes: Names of people in the community are collected before the service with at least four (4) readers, alternating. After each reading, a Candlelighter will light a candle in memory of the person/s named. Read the names dramatically to give a sense of the urgency and breadth of this growing problem.*

## MEDITATION HYMN "Open My Eyes" (vs. 2)

### STORIES AND POETRY OF WOMEN

ONE: Let us listen now to words of women and enter into their experience even as we also bring our own painful memories. By touching our pain, by breaking the silence with our stories, we can discover the truth. Remember that Jesus said, "You will know the truth, and the truth will make you free." (*John* 8:32) Let us be in solidarity with our sisters so that together we can build a community of resistance and hope. Knowing the truth will set us free for constructive action.

*[Voice 1 walks slowly to the center of the circle, or to the front of the chancel, carrying a basket of stones. She sits on a chair and begins reading.]*

**Voice 1:** Three days ago he beat me. Now with roses at my bedside he whispers to me gently, running his fingers through my hair. With the same hands that had been clenched around my throat. The same hands that held the bottle for our baby. The same hands that held a pillow over my face when I screamed for help. The same hands that once held mine in marriage vow. The same hands clenched had broken my nose. The hands that reached out to catch me when I was pregnant and tripped. The hands that hung up the phone when friends and family called for me. Hands that held me up when my sister died. Hands that grabbed me jealously. The hands dripping with blood and kindness. Hands that want to claim my body! Cringing, I pray to God "Oh no!"

*A Poem, "The Apology" by Eileen Hudon. Reprinted from Sojourner Shelter Newsletter. Used with permission of the author.*

*[Voice 1 sets the basket of stones on the floor and remains seated in her chair. Voices 2 and 3 come and stand behind her, back-to-back, facing outward in two directions. They should stand behind Voice 1, not touching her and seeming to be speaking as the two sides of her brain; Voices 2 and 3 represent the inward struggle of Voice 1. Voice 2 looks at a wedding or photo album when she speaks; Voice 3 carries a Bible and seems to be reading from it.]*

**Voice 2:** I am in my 30's and so is my husband. I have a high school diploma and am presently attending a local college trying to obtain the additional education I need. My husband is a college graduate and a professional in his field. We are both attractive and, for the most part, respected and well liked. We have four children and live in a middle-class home with all the comfort we could possibly ever want. I have everything except a life without fear.

**Voice 3:** My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from helping me, from the words of my groaning? O my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer; and by night, but find no rest.

**Voice 2:** For most of my married life, I have been periodically beaten by my husband. What do I mean by beaten? I mean painful bruises, swelling, bleeding wounds, unconsciousness and combinations of these things. I've been kicked in the abdomen when I was visibly pregnant. I have been punched and kicked in the head, chest, face and abdomen more times than I can count. I have been slapped for saying something about politics, for having a different view about religion, for crying. I have been threatened when he has had a bad day and when he has had a good day. After each beating my husband has left the house and remained away for hours.

**Voice 3:** But I am a worm, and not human; scorned by others, and despised by the people. All who see me mock at me; they make mouths at me, they shake their heads.

**Voice 2:** Few people have ever seen my black and blue face or swollen lips, because I stayed indoors afterward, feeling ashamed. Usually the first response to this story is "Why didn't you seek help?"

**Voice 3:** "Commit your cause to God; let God deliver, let God rescue the one in whom God delights!"

**Voice 2:** Early in our marriage I went to a clergyman who, after a few visits, told me that my husband meant no real harm, he was just confused and insecure. So I was encouraged to be more tolerant and understanding. Most important, I was told to forgive him the beatings just as Christ had forgiven from the cross. I did that, too.

**Voice 3:** Yet it was you who took me from the womb; you kept me safe on my mothers' breast. On you I was cast from my birth, and since my mother bore me you have been my God. Do not be far from me, for trouble is near and there is no one to help.

**Voice 2:** Things continued. Next time I turned to a doctor. I was given pills to relax me and told to take things a little easier. I was just too nervous.

I turned to a friend, and when her husband found out, he accused me of either making things up or exaggerating the situation. She was told to stay away from me. She didn't but she could no longer really help me. Just by believing me she was made to feel disloyal.

I turned to a professional family-guidance agency. I was told that my husband needed help and that I should find a way to control the incidents. I couldn't control the beatings, that was the whole point of my seeking help. At the agency I found I had to defend myself against the suspicion that I wanted to be hit!

**Voice 3:** Many bulls encircle me, strong bulls of Bashan surround me; they open wide their mouths at me, like a ravening and roaring lion.

**Voice 2:** I called the police one time. They not only did not respond to the call, they called several hours later to ask if things had settled down. I could have been dead by then!

**Voice 3:** I am poured out like water, and all my bones are out of joint; my heart is like wax; it is melted within my breast; my mouth is dried up like a potsherd, and my tongue sticks to my jaws; you lay me in the dust of death.

**Voice 2:** I have nowhere to go if it happens again. No one wants to take in a woman with four children. Even if there were someone kind enough to care, no one wants to become involved in what is commonly referred to as a "domestic situation."

**Voice 3:** O God, do not be far away! O my help, come quickly to my aid!

*Litany by Carol J. Adams drawing on a letter from a battered wife found in Battered Wives by Del Marlin and Psalm 22:1-2,6-15,19 NRSV adapted; reprinted from Working Together, Vol. 1, No.6. Adapted and used with permission.*

SCRIPTURE [This may be danced or interpreted liturgically as it is read.]

ONE: Hear these words of the Psalmist and imagine that she is a woman caught in a violent marriage: *Psalm 55: 4-8, 12-14, 20-21 NRSV*

**Voice 4:**

God! I keep saying  
God I can't do it not this time  
the pain the pain  
sure you can honey she says  
you can I know you can  
but God i don't know this time  
the pain the pain  
can't be hidden honey  
I won't leave God says  
and wipes my brow and kisses me even though she didn't have to  
God i keep saying  
God i hurt and she says oh honey I know you do.

*A Poem entitled "Survivor. by Martha Popson. Reprinted from **Daughters of Sarah**, Vol. 13, No.4, July-August, 1987. Used with permission.*

RESPONSE TO THE PAIN

**All: We have heard the anguish of a battered wife. We have also heard the cry of lamentation from our biblical faith. We have cried to the God of our fathers and mothers, but we fear that we have not been heard. The patriarchal mask that God has been given has caused humiliation, guilt, and despair among women. Too often the victim herself has been made to feel that she is the cause of the problem. We must break the silence! We must strip off the mask of patriarchy given to our God so that the God of justice, healing and hope will be revealed.**

[Optional] LITURGICAL DANCE "The Prayer of A Woman" By Kate French

MEDITATION HYMN "Open My Eyes" (vs. 3)

PH #324

REMEMBERING THOSE AFFECTED

ONE: O God of compassion, you feel our pain and cry with us in our passion.

**ALL: God of justice, you rage with us against the injustice of our experiences of violence and abuse. Be with us today.**

ONE: As sisters of faith and hope, gathered here today, we remember:

**Left Side: Our mothers, who had few choices; who did what they had to; who resisted sometimes quietly, sometimes loudly; who carried the secrets of their abuse silently in their hearts.**

**Right Side: Our sisters, who were made the scapegoat; who said, "No!" but to no avail; who thought they were protecting us; who were given tranquilizers to quiet their rage; who carried the secrets of their abuse silently in their hearts.**

**Left Side: Our neighbors, whose cries we heard in the night, whose bruises we saw in the day, who fought back and paid the price, who carried the secret of their abuse silently in their hearts.**

**Right Side: Our girlfriends, who spent so much time at our house, not wanting to go home; whom everyone thought were just shy and quiet; who carried the secrets of their abuse silently in their hearts.**

**Left Side: Ourselves, who may have tried to tell but were ignored; who were not protected by anyone; who were not believed; who carry the secrets of our abuse silently in our hearts.**

**Right Side: We remember and mourn the loss of childhood; the loss of creativity; the loss of vocation; the loss of relationships; the loss of time; the cost of resources required for healing; the enormous waste of humanity caused by sexual and domestic violence.**

**All: We remember and mourn those who have not survived; whose lives were taken by someone's violence; who died in despair never knowing justice.**

*(From *Striking Terror No More*, pg. 96)*

*[Voice 1 picks up the basket of stones, stands up, puts the basket of stones on the chair and exits. Voices 2 and 3 follow.]*

ONE: Eleanor Roosevelt said, "It is better to light one candle than to curse the darkness!" I invite you to come forward and light a candle or bring a flower out of love for a woman you would remember. Call out her name as you light her candle. Let us hold these named sisters silently in our hearts.

## NAMING OUR SISTERS

*["There Is A Balm In Gilead" should be played softly in the background during the naming. When publicizing the service, encourage persons to bring a candle or flower with them to remember a woman who was a victim of violence, or provide a vase of individual flowers and dozens of candles for the use of participants at this time.]*

*[After everyone who wants to remember someone has come forward, a worship leader continues]*

ONE: Let us hear the names, ages and home towns of the victims of sexual or domestic violence who have died in our state during the past year.

*[Leader pauses as names are read from a list given to participants. Each person reading a name may light a candle after she reads it, or if there is a long list, the names may be read and a large candle lit for all of them at the completion of the reading of their names, ages, etc. When this is finished, a leader continues.]*

ONE: I light this candle [or bring a flower] for women who are victims of violence but whose names we are unable to speak publicly. Let us hold them in our hearts and prayers.

ONE: God of compassion, you feel our pain and cry with us in our passion.

**ALL: God of justice, you rage with us against the injustice of these experiences. Let our cry of "never again" come unto you.**

*[The music "There Is A Balm In Gilead" should stop here.]*

## CONFESSION OF COMPLICITY

**ALL: O merciful one, we confess that by our silence and inaction we have passed by on the other side, leaving a sister suffering by the side of the road. We confess that in our fear, we have hesitated and turned away from life adding to the pain and suffering. Bring us to repentance.**

**O Holy One, open our eyes to see the violence in our lives, within us and among us. Open our mouths to name what we see and to acknowledge our own pain. Open our hearts to let in the pain and suffering of family members, friends, child victims, adult survivors, our neighbors. Open our mouths to call to account those who have harmed others. Be merciful and bring us back to life in Christ. Amen.** (From *Striking Terror No More*, pg. 92)

## LITANY OF HEALING

ONE: God of grace, you nurture us with a love deeper than any we know, and your will for us is always healing and salvation.

**ALL: We praise you and thank you, O God.**

ONE: God of love, you enter our lives, our pain and our brokenness, and you stretch out your healing hands to us wherever we are.

**ALL: We praise you and thank you, O God.**

ONE: God of strength, you will us with your presence and send us forth with love and healing to all whom we meet.

**ALL: We praise you and thank you, O God.**

ONE: God of love, we ask you to hear the prayers of your people.

**ALL: Hear us, O God of life.**

ONE: Touch with your healing power the minds and hearts of all who suffer from sickness, injury, or disability, and make them whole again.

**ALL: Hear us, O God of life.**

ONE: Touch with your healing power the minds and hearts of all who live in confusion or doubt, and fill them with your light.

**ALL: Hear us, O God of life.**

ONE: Touch with your healing power the minds and hearts of all who are burdened by anguish, despair, or isolation and set them free in love.

**ALL: Hear us, O God of life.**

ONE: Break the bonds of those who are imprisoned by fear, compulsion, secrecy, and silence.

**ALL: Come with your healing power, O God.**

ONE: Fill with peace those who grieve over separation and loss.

**ALL: Come with you healing power, O God.**

ONE: Restore to wholeness all those who have been broken in life or in spirit by violence within their families; restore to wholeness all those who have been broken in life or in spirit by violence within our Family of Nations; restore to them the power of your love; and give to them the strength of your presence.

**ALL: Come, O God, and restore us to wholeness and love.**

ONE: Let us now name before God those, including ourselves, for whom we seek healing:

We lift up before you this day all those who have died of violence that they may have rest

**ALL: In that place where there is no pain or grief, but life eternal.**

ONE: O God, in you all is turned to light, and brokenness is healed. Look with compassion on us and on those for whom we pray, that we may be re-created in wholeness, in love and in compassion for one another.

**ALL: Amen.**

OFFERING

ONE: Prayerfully consider how you have been blessed economically and give in thankful response and hope. May God's blessings in your life be multiplied through the gift you give today.

## OFFERTORY

### PRAYER OF DEDICATION

**ALL: We offer ourselves to you, O God our Creator. We offer our hands. Use healing touch to comfort our sisters, brothers, and children who are afraid. We offer our eyes and ears. May we see and hear the signs and stories of violence so that all may have someone with them in their pain and confusion. We offer our hearts and our tears as their hurt and sorrow echo within us. We offer our own stories of violence. We offer all our skills. Use our gifts to end violence. We offer our faith, our hope and our love. May our encounters with violence bring us closer to you and to each other. May these monetary offerings be pleasing in your sight. All this we ask through Jesus Christ who knows the pain of violence. Amen.** (From *Striking Terror No More*, pg. 93)

### THE CHURCH'S RESPONSE

ONE: We are women of faith. Many of us are active church members. We have heard the cries of our sisters. Many of us know violence in our midst. What shall be the church's response?

ONE: Encourage your pastor to get training to help address the issues of sexual and domestic violence. Ask clergy to speak out against sexual and domestic violence from the pulpit.

ONE: Invite staff from local programs to make presentations to every group in the church.

ONE: Provide a place in your church building for a support group for survivors.

ONE: Volunteer at a battered women's shelter.

ONE: Teach children they have a right to their bodies. Don't force them to hug or kiss adults.

ONE: Encourage clergy to offer pre-marriage counseling dealing with equality, conflict, violence and control.

ONE: Contribute to the financial support of local and national sexual and domestic violence programs.

ONE: What ideas do you have? What needs to be done in this community? What is happening that needs more support? What would help you or other survivors of violence? How do you think churches, church people and concerned people might respond? I invite each of us to name in our hearts one thing that we will commit ourselves to do to help break the cycle of sexual and domestic violence. What will be your response?

### CLOSING PRAYER

**ALL: Loving and Compassionate God, today we have named the violence! We have broken the silence! We have felt your presence in our midst! We have shared ideas for action! We have lit candles in the darkness! We have named, remembered and celebrated**

**many people that you so love. Bless our time together, our knowing and that which we will do in the future. Give us persistent hearts and strong bodies for the work that will end violence in our midst. Send your Holy Spirit especially to our churches and church leaders. Open their eyes, their mouths, their minds and their hearts to do justice for the women in our community. In the name and the spirit of Jesus, we pray. Amen.**

\*HYMN "Open My Eyes" (Vs. 4)

PH #324

\*SENDING FORTH

ONE: During the closing music, please come forward and take a stone with you from the basket, as a reminder to pray for all those we have named today. Let it also remind you to be solidly persistent in the action that you are committed to do to help end violence against women.

BENEDICTION

ONE: Now, go forth with the courage and persistence of the widow, saying "never again" to the abuse of women and children. Go forth to make justice in your life, in your family, in your church, in your community. Go forth knowing that we follow in Jesus' steps empowered by the Holy Spirit. Go forth rejoicing in this knowledge! Amen.

POSTLUDE [Optional SOLO. See Appendix on next page.]

## APPENDIX:

### **Optional prayer to be added after Confession of Complicity.**

#### NAMING OF JUSTICE-MAKERS

ONE: There are many in our community, including some of you who are here, who serve survivors of sexual and domestic violence: counselors who work to heal the wounds caused by violence, advocates who are committed to public policy changes, and others who work to stop the cycle of violence. We want to recognize those who heed Jesus' words not to give up, who are persistent in demanding justice, over and over and over again. This is a time to remember them, to name those in our midst or those persons you know who have given time, energy, resources, vision, courage, persistence and friendship to victims of violence. You may even name yourself as one who is committed to doing justice in your locale. Speak the names now of justice-makers, either aloud or in your heart. Then we will bring our offerings of thanksgiving for their lives and for the work that God is doing in our midst.

*[Pause for the naming of justice-makers.]*

### **Optional Reading after “The Church’s Response”**

ONE: To be a witness means coming to terms with stones... and with believing. On Easter morning the women encountered a series of strange occurrences. The stone had been rolled from the door of the tomb. They saw things never seen before, But nobody would believe them. The stone was a seal, and the seal was broken, But nobody would believe them. The hearts of the leadership had turned to stone. No wonder they couldn't believe them. The hearts of the women were as heavy as stone because no body would believe them. Stone-cold, stone-deaf, stone-walled... Words all too familiar. Words that break our hearts. Words well known to women, who come up against immovable obstacles at almost every turn. Stones are the tests of believers. Do you believe the Living God can roll any stone aside?

"To Be a Witness" ...from a Liberation ritual entitled "You Shall Be My Witnesses" pg. 99 in the book: *Woman Prayer, Woman Song*, Miriam Therese Winter, Crossroads, NY, 1990.