



## Hearts and Hands

Piecing Together Faith and Safety

for Rural Victims of Sexual and Domestic Violence

**Sexual Violence: Can We Please Talk About It?**



Dear Faith Community Leaders and Members,

Let's admit it – sexual violence is difficult to talk about, especially in our congregations. Like everyone else, people of faith struggle to understand sexual violence and its effects on survivors, families, and communities.

And so . . . we are mostly silent.

Victims and survivors of sexual violence hear our silence loud and clear. They might think:

- ✦ *"I must be the only one this has ever happened to, because I've never heard anyone here in my congregation talk about it."*
- ✦ *"Where is God in this anguish?"*
- ✦ *"Why did this happen to me?"*
- ✦ *"Is God punishing me?"*
- ✦ *"Is this part of God's plan for my life?"*
- ✦ *"Am I supposed to just forgive and forget?"*

Our silence does not help the sexual violence victims and survivors among us. These are the 1 in 4 girls and 1 in 6 boys who will be sexually abused by age 18,<sup>1</sup> the 1 in 6 women who experience a completed or attempted rape in their lifetimes,<sup>2</sup> older Americans who are particularly vulnerable, the college student who is sexually assaulted on campus, or the woman who is forced by her husband to participate in sexual acts that demean and humiliate her.

Victims and survivors are not just statistics somewhere. They are our sisters and brothers, our grandparents and cousins, our friends and neighbors, and beloved members of our congregation and community.

Victims of sexual violence need the support of their congregations.

They are asking: *"Can we please talk about it?"*

We hope that this booklet, and the resources that accompany it, will help us begin a conversation that will lead to healing, justice, and peace for victims and survivors of sexual violence in rural communities and congregations across America.

Sincerely,



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## Table of Contents

Healing, Justice, and Peace 5



Surprising Facts About Sexual Violence 6



What Is Sexual Violence? 8



How Can I Help? 10



For Immediate Help and More Information 13

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You can also download this and other rural resources  
for free at [www.interfaithpartners.org](http://www.interfaithpartners.org).

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Although it can be difficult to talk about sexual violence, faith communities DO talk about healing, justice, and peace, which are all critical to victims and survivors. Even in the aftermath of sexual violence, **survivors can find healing** if they can talk about what happened, find support in their families and communities, and reach closure.

*"The longer you keep it to yourself, the harder it is."*<sup>3</sup>

*"[For survivors] the most important object was to gain validation from the community. This required an acknowledgement of the basic facts of the crime and an acknowledgement of harm."*<sup>4</sup>

**Survivors can find justice** when they are not blamed, when they have the support they need to overcome the fear, trauma, and shame, and when perpetrators are held accountable.

*"Community denunciation of the crime was of great importance to the survivors because it affirmed the solidarity of the community with the victim and transferred the burden of disgrace from victim to offender."*<sup>5</sup>

And **survivors can find peace** if their community helps them be safe in their schools, neighborhoods, homes, and congregations and holds the assailants accountable.

*"Sexual violence . . . is a violation of a human being's right to safety. The effects can be devastating. . . ."*<sup>6</sup>

*"It was difficult for me to try to live a normal life again after the rape. There are simple daily routines people do that I was terrified to do. For example, I didn't feel safe walking anywhere, whether it was day or night."*<sup>7</sup>

Survivors need faith community support to find healing, justice, and peace. They are asking: **"Can we please talk?"**

## To start the conversation, let's look at some surprising facts about sexual violence.

**Sexual violence is NOT ONLY when a stranger jumps out of the bushes and rapes you.**

"People who sexually assault usually attack someone they know – a friend, date, classmate, neighbor, co-worker, or relative. Of adult victims, 73% knew the attacker, 38% were friends of the attacker, 28% were in an intimate relationship with the attacker, and 7% were a relative of the attacker." "Child victims knew the offender 90% of the time."

"About 40% of sexual assaults take place in the victim's own home. Another 20% occur in the home of a friend, neighbor, or relative."<sup>8</sup>

**Sexual violence is NEVER the victim's fault.**

"It doesn't matter what someone is wearing or how they are acting. No one asks to be raped."

People who sexually assault "often use force, threat, or injury." However, "an absence of injuries does not mean the victim consented."

Sexual violence can and does happen to "people of all genders, ages, races, religions, incomes, abilities, professions, ethnicities, and sexual orientations. However, social inequalities can heighten the risk."

Sexual violence affects all of us: children, teens, young adults, adults, and elders.<sup>9</sup>

## **Sexual violence is NOT about sex.**

Sexual violence is “a crime not typically motivated by sexual desire but by the desire to control, humiliate, and/or harm.”<sup>10</sup>

“By their nature, these crimes are displays of raw power, intended to subordinate the victim and to teach her to know her place.”<sup>11</sup>

## **Even within a marriage, rape CAN happen.**

In general, religious traditions recognize the value and dignity of every human being, and the right of both wife and husband to be “free from threats, intimidation, force, pressure, or abuse of power or authority.”<sup>12</sup>

Marital rape is a crime in all 50 states of the United States.

““There is no agony like bearing an untold story inside of you.””

*Maya Angelou*

## So, what is sexual violence?

Sexual violence is first and foremost violence. It is a crime that misuses human sexuality in order to control, humiliate, and harm. Sexual violence occurs whenever a person is forced, coerced, and/or manipulated into any unwanted sexual activity. This includes when the victim is unable to consent due to age, illness, disability, religious strictures, or the influence of alcohol or other drugs. Sexual violence includes rape, incest, child sexual assault, sexual harassment, sexual exploitation, human trafficking, and unwanted sexual contact or touching.<sup>13</sup>

Sexual violence violates a person's humanity and dignity and destroys their trust and feeling of safety on the most profound level. It affects all of us: survivors, loved ones, congregations, and communities.

Sexual assault and sexual violence also violate the core values of the religious community, which include human dignity, justice, and peace. Unfortunately, even within faith communities, the sacred bonds of human relationship are sometimes broken.

Sexual violence perpetrated by a religious leader also occurs. This is a violation of sacred trust and an abuse of religious power and authority. The harm done to the



survivor is compounded by the religious leader's power, authority, and standing in the community. Many faith communities have developed ethical guidelines for religious leaders that condemn the misuse of religious power and authority.

The actions of a perpetrator of sexual violence should never be condoned, and the survivor should never be blamed for the crime.

Survivors of sexual violence need the support of their faith and their congregations in order to find healing, justice, and peace. Sexual violence causes profound trauma that requires healing on all levels: physical, emotional, psychological, and spiritual.

Anyone in the congregation could be called upon to help, so we all need to know how to provide compassionate support . . . how to talk about it.

“*The big turn around you make in your head is from victim to survivor.*”

Sexual violence survivor<sup>14</sup>

## I'm a member of a congregation . . . how can I help a survivor of sexual violence?

### If a sexual assault has recently occurred, you can:

- ❖ encourage the survivor to get to a safe place.<sup>15</sup>
- ❖ reassure the survivor that she is not alone and not to blame – anyone can be a victim of sexual violence.
- ❖ encourage her to make decisions for herself, and honor those decisions.
- ❖ refer the survivor to local sexual assault services, to the National Sexual Assault Hotline (1-800-656-4673/ HOPE), and to the National Sexual Assault Online Hotline ([www.rainn.org](http://www.rainn.org)).
- ❖ encourage the survivor to seek medical help. It is critical that the survivor does not shower, douche, change clothes, eat, drink, or smoke before getting medical care.<sup>16</sup>
- ❖ suggest that the survivor talk to an advocate on the National Sexual Assault Hotline (1-800-656-4673/ HOPE) or the National Sexual Assault Online Hotline ([www.rainn.org](http://www.rainn.org)) for answers to questions about the criminal justice process. Sexual violence is a crime.
- ❖ offer to accompany the survivor to the hospital, police station, local sexual violence services, etc.<sup>17</sup>



## Over time, you can also:

- ❖ ensure enough time and a safe, private place to talk.
- ❖ know your state's laws on mandated reporting. Assure the survivor of confidentiality unless:
  - ❖ what she discloses involves a situation that you are mandated to report (for example, sexual or physical violence perpetrated against a child, an older adult, or an adult with disabilities), OR
  - ❖ she might harm herself or someone else.
- ❖ be calm, compassionate, and non-judgmental. Don't press for details. Allow the survivor to tell the story in his or her own words.
- ❖ reassure her that she can regain control over her life.
- ❖ help the survivor to talk about his or her faith. Survivors may be angry, confused, or feel betrayed by God. Listen to and honor the questions; you don't have to know all the answers. If appropriate, assure the survivor that God did not cause the assault and is present to provide strength and courage. Be a loving and supportive presence. Provide hope, spiritual care, and resources.<sup>18</sup>
- ❖ continue to support the survivor throughout his recovery and/or the prosecution of his case. Offer both tangible support and spiritual resources.
- ❖ take care of yourself. Talking about sexual violence, supporting survivors, and making your congregation's response more effective takes spiritual strength, determination, and courage! Stay connected to your own faith resources, traditions, and spiritual disciplines.<sup>19</sup>

A large, light purple opening quotation mark is positioned at the top of a dark purple rectangular area. The background of the entire page is a colorful quilt with various colored squares (red, blue, green, purple, pink) and patterns.

*I know what God wants for me.  
I need to be healed.*

Sexual violence survivor <sup>20</sup>

A large, light purple closing quotation mark is positioned at the bottom of the dark purple rectangular area.

## FOR IMMEDIATE HELP

Call your local police, sheriff, or Village Public Safety Officer, or dial 911 where available.

Call the National Sexual Assault Hotline

1-800-656-4673/HOPE | [www.rainn.org](http://www.rainn.org)

*The National Sexual Assault Hotline is free, confidential, and available 24/7. Language translation is available. Anyone can call. You do not have to give your name or identifying information to receive help.*

*Add local service provider information.*

*If there is no local information here,  
call the National Sexual Assault Hotline  
(1-800-656-4673/HOPE)  
and ask for services in your area.*

## FOR MORE INFORMATION

National Sexual Violence Resource Center

877-739-3895 (toll free) | [www.nsvrc.org](http://www.nsvrc.org)

Rape, Abuse & Incest National Network

202-544-3064 | [www.rainn.org](http://www.rainn.org)

## References

<sup>1</sup>Adapted with permission and with many thanks from the National Sexual Violence Resource Center, "Fact Sheet: What is Sexual Violence?" See [www.nsvrc.org](http://www.nsvrc.org) for additional information.

<sup>2</sup>Adapted with permission and with many thanks from the National Sexual Violence Resource Center, "Fact Sheet: What is Sexual Violence?" See [www.nsvrc.org](http://www.nsvrc.org) for additional information.

<sup>3</sup>Rape Treatment Center, Santa Monica, CA, Poster No. 14, 2004.

<sup>4</sup>Judith Herman, "Justice From the Victim's Perspective," *Violence Against Women*, Vol. 11, No. 5, May 2005, p. 585.

<sup>5</sup>Judith Herman, "Justice From the Victim's Perspective," *Violence Against Women*, Vol. 11, No. 5, May 2005, p. 585.

<sup>6</sup>Adapted with permission and with many thanks from the National Sexual Violence Resource Center, "Fact Sheet: What is Sexual Violence?" See [www.nsvrc.org](http://www.nsvrc.org) for additional information.

<sup>7</sup>Lisa Frank, "Walking in the Darkness, Then Finding the Light," in Sarah Deer, Bonnie Clairmont, Carrie A. Martell, and Maureen L. White Eagle, eds., *Sharing Our Stories of Survival: Native Women Surviving Violence*, Altamira Press, 2008., p.116.

<sup>8</sup>Material in this section quoted and/or adapted with permission and with many thanks from the National Sexual Violence Resource Center, "Fact Sheet: What is Sexual Violence?" See [www.nsvrc.org](http://www.nsvrc.org) for additional information.

<sup>9</sup>Material in this section quoted and/or adapted with permission and with many thanks from the National Sexual Violence Resource Center, "Fact Sheet: Impact of Sexual Violence." See [www.nsvrc.org](http://www.nsvrc.org) for additional information.

<sup>10</sup>National Sexual Violence Resource Center, "Fact Sheet: Impact of Sexual Violence." See [www.nsvrc.org](http://www.nsvrc.org) for additional information.

<sup>11</sup>Judith Herman, "Justice From the Victim's Perspective," *Violence Against Women*, Vol. 11, No. 5, May 2005, p. 572.

<sup>12</sup>National Sexual Violence Resource Center, "Fact Sheet: Impact of Sexual Violence." See [www.nsvrc.org](http://www.nsvrc.org) for additional information.

<sup>13</sup>Material in this section quoted and/or adapted with permission from the National Sexual Violence Resource Center, "Fact Sheet: Impact of Sexual Violence" and "Fact Sheet: What is Sexual Violence?" See [www.nsvrc.org](http://www.nsvrc.org) for additional information.

<sup>14</sup>Quoted from *Dancing in the Darkness*, "inspirational quotes," 2003-07-02. See [www.dancinginthedarkness.com](http://www.dancinginthedarkness.com).

<sup>15</sup>Material in this section quoted and/or adapted with permission and with many thanks from the Georgia Network to End Sexual Assault (GNESA), “Practical Recommendations for the Church’s Response to Sexual Assault.” For more information, please contact GNESA at 866-354-3672 or see [www.gnesa.org](http://www.gnesa.org).

<sup>16</sup>Quoted and/or adapted with permission and with many thanks from the Georgia Network to End Sexual Assault (GNESA), “Practical Recommendations for the Church’s Response to Sexual Assault.” For more information, please contact GNESA at 866-354-3672 or see [www.gnesa.org](http://www.gnesa.org).

<sup>17</sup>Adapted with permission and with many thanks from the Rape, Abuse, and Incest National Network (RAINN), “Help a Loved One.” For more information, see [www.rainn.org](http://www.rainn.org).

<sup>18</sup>Quoted and/or adapted with permission and with many thanks from the Georgia Network to End Sexual Assault (GNESA), “Practical Recommendations for the Church’s Response to Sexual Assault.” For more information, please contact GNESA at 866-354-3672 or see [www.gnesa.org](http://www.gnesa.org).

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<sup>20</sup>Philip Yancey, *What Good is God? In Search of a Faith that Matters*, Hachette Book Group, 2010, pp. 73 -74.

““ *The horizon leans forward, offering you  
space to place new steps of change.* ””

*Maya Angelou,  
“The Rock Cries Out to Us Today”*

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The graphic design in “Hearts and Hands: Piecing Together Faith and Safety for Rural Victims of Sexual and Domestic Violence” is based on quilts. For centuries, American women have pieced together cloth fragments to create quilts that are both useful and beautiful. Often, quilting brought women together to sing, pray, and socialize over busy needles. For these women, “stitched fabrics were often the most eloquent records of their lives.” Through their quilts, women have advocated for everything from suffrage to abolition to temperance, while becoming “not only witnesses to but active agents in important historical change.” We hope that the quilts will inspire all of us to become active agents in ending sexual assault and domestic violence in rural communities across America.

Quotations from Pat Ferrero and Elaine Hedges, *Hearts and Hands: The Influence of Women and Quilts on American Society*, San Francisco, The Quilt Digest Press, 1987.