Listening to the Voices of Survivors - Understanding Domestic Violence

Four very courageous women have told me their stories of Domestic Violence and allowed me to share them anonymously. These are the actual words of real people telling the truth about their experience. In these stories, you will see that domestic violence is no respecter of persons; it happens to different kinds of people and crosses all kinds of cultural boundaries, social, economic, ethnic, and religious. In these stories you will also see that churches can make a difference. Churches can be stumbling blocks, allowing abuse to continue, or can be sources of healing and strength.

Guidelines for using these stories:
- Have four different people read the voices of the four different stories
- In small groups discuss the questions following the stories
- Take time to reflect and pray around the issue of Domestic Violence, especially for those who may still be suffering with no voice

Survivor Stories – A Reading

Alicia – My name is Alicia, I’m a domestic violence advocate and a plant “nerd”. I have a doctorate in plant pathology.

Betty – My name is Betty, I’m a fighter and a survivor.

Carla – My name is Carla, I’m strong and capable.

Deborah – My name is Deborah, I am shy and don’t make friends easily.

Alicia – I don’t identify with any faith tradition and don’t practice religion.

Betty – I identify myself as Catholic and also, more recently, a Vineyard Church member.

Carla – I identify myself as a charismatic, Pentecostal believer.

Deborah - I identify myself a Christian Pentecostal currently. At the time I was not an active member of any church and was raised in Methodist Denomination

Alicia – I first knew my husband when I was 14; he was a DJ at a local radio station. I was still in school.

Betty – I got to know my husband at the University as students. We were impressed with each other on our first meeting. He had been in seminary and had a good moral/Catholic background. He had been sheltered from a lot of experience in dating; I had too. I worked as a high school teacher and was also working on my Master’s degree in education/chemistry.
Carla – I first knew my husband via a church Bible study. I worked as an airline customer service agent. He was a very intelligent guy with lots of charisma, very gifted. He would easily attract a crowd whereas I was shy and withdrawn. He was everything I was not, and I liked to see how motivated he was and fearless in engaging with people.

Deborah – My partner and I were introduced to each other by a family member, I was 24 years old. He was out-going, well liked, dressed handsomely and had many friends. I worked as a State Claims Administrator and later as a supervisor for a large auto company.

Alicia – We married when I was 16. He was 30. I have one daughter.

Betty – We dated for a year and had a big, formal church wedding. We moved into an apartment while I taught and he finished his education degree. I have 4 children, 3 girls and 1 boy.

Carla – We married and had 3 children together, all girls.

Deborah - We began dating shortly after we met and after about six months became live-in partners. This relationship continued for fourteen years and two children. My partner was divorced with one child from that marriage and I had one child from a previous relationship.

Alicia – He was controlling and began isolating me from friends & family even before we were married. Physical abuse began two months into the marriage; and he very strictly defined our roles as husband and wife.

Betty– The abuse started out imperceptibly to me. I had been abused before and I really didn’t know it was abuse. He would verbally abuse the children and me. He sometimes punched or hit the children; he did not hit me.

Carla – The abuse started as subtle manipulation and very occasional short bursts of rage. I felt that he was smarter and more exceptionally gifted than me. Therefore, I would just let him make decisions. It took the weight of responsibility off me. That was all under the guise of "submission". He would also make me question myself and my own likes/dislikes, dreams and desires. Pretty soon, I did not even know what my favorite color was; it was whatever he wanted it to be. The manipulations became much stronger and more abusive and I knew if I did not follow along, the consequences would be an angry outburst, a raging that was out of control.

Deborah - The abuse started out shortly after our first child was born, two years into our relationship. He had been mildly possessive from the beginning (I was flattered). I didn’t interpret it as controlling. His behavior moved from one of inquiry to one of demanding, where I was going, who I had spoken with that day, who were my friends at work, always with a disapproving comment. Then the physical/mental abuse began, name calling and threats of bodily harm to myself and family members. I spoke to my father about the threats and he in turn spoke to him about his behavior. He assured my father that there was nothing to worry about. He was skillful in convincing people that he was the most loving, gentle and charming person alive.
Alicia – We were married in the UK, but moved to the US within weeks of when we were married. He refused to help me get my INS status in order, so I couldn’t work or leave the country. He later threatened me with deportation, and separating me from my daughter.

Betty – He was sexually focused and he did not know how to give any other affection to me. I thought sex was love.

Carla – He did not have any qualms about his rages in front of our children. Any apology always came with blame that it was my fault, because I made him mad. The rages became worse and he did less to hide them. They occurred in a restaurant or store, eventually in leadership meetings at church; and that’s pretty tough since he was the pastor.

Deborah - He would also tell me how much he loved me and our children and how much he wanted us to be a family and that he never wanted to lose us. It was four years into our relationship now and he had a career change (became a private chef). He suggested that we move to another state and get a fresh new start which. We made the move and another child was born. Although I was allowed to work outside the home I quickly discovered that I was in total isolation from family and friends and was not familiar with my surroundings. I began to see that this was the major reason for the move. The abuse quickly escalated...beatings, broken bones and black eyes. There were times I was forced into the bathroom at gun point and with a loaded gun at my head was forced to plead for my life. He always warned me against leaving and told me no one cared about me but him, no one would ever help me, and my children would be taken away because I was crazy.

Alicia – I never told anyone because I was ashamed.

Betty – I never told anyone until my children were falling apart with anorexia, drug addiction, and sexual promiscuity. Then I told a counselor who I was seeing for my children; she told me it was abuse and she needed to report it to Protective Services. I still did not perceive it as abuse, especially to myself.

Carla – I once tried to tell a trusted minister that I thought would be able to influence my husband. They were both in the same hunting club; it was fruitless.

Deborah – Dear of reprisal caused me to keep “the secret”. On many occasions (100s of times) police were called by my neighbors. This was during 1960-1979; he was never told to leave or arrested even when there was visible injury.

Alicia – I could never tell anyone in my church because I really wasn’t aware that it was abuse. He minimized his actions so much, and I didn’t know about emotional abuse. I was introduced to religion through him. We became members of a large non-denominational church. For the first time since moving to the US, he allowed me to develop friendships, and I eventually became a Sunday school teacher in the toddler group. In women’s groups we were taught to be submissive, and if we were faithful to God, he would help our husbands be better men. Unfortunately, no matter how faithful I was, the abuse never stopped. I felt very alone. My husband’s behavior became so abhorrent, that it turned me against religion.
**Betty** – I never could tell anyone in my church because I did not trust them. I had already been abused by a person in the church.

**Carla** – I had no one to confide in; I kept it in all the dark as much as possible as the abuse continued to get worse. I did not want the church to fall apart because of me exposing my husband. I believed and held to hope that God would intervene with him privately and deal with his abuses. I was engulfed in fear that my exposing him would hurt hundreds of people that trusted him and looked up to him, that they might leave the church or worse, turn away from God because I let the secret out. Also, though I know that pride is wrong; I was so ashamed, and did not want the blame and shame of this situation on me.

**Deborah** – I never could tell anyone in my church because, while I was brought up in the church I had stopped attending. I was alienated from family and church out of fear, guilt and shame.

**Alicia** – A turning point for me was when he was openly unfaithful, which was something I could concretely say was unacceptable. When I started making plans to leave, the abuse became more severe. One evening he attacked without any provocation (he had me so convinced that the abuse was my fault, and he timed his physical attacks so that he would strike immediately after I had said something to him. This tactic led me to believe that I had provoked him to hit me). The unfaithfulness was enough for me to decide that I needed to leave. I left that night and never went back.

**Betty** – A turning point was when I found out about his homosexual past and his addiction to pornography; he was charged at the school where he worked with criminal sexual conduct. He was let go; we had no income; and I had to go back to teaching immediately after 21 years staying at home with the children. I also came to understand that his rage and sexual inappropriateness had severely damaged our children.

**Carla** – A turning point came when he had an affair; but I knew that I had to give him a chance to repent and turn around, forgive him. The Lord strengthened me over time and showed me pictures of what my life was really like and how out of order it was. I saw how hard it was for my children. I worked long hours and there still was not enough money. My husband told me I was a lousy employee because I didn’t know how to ask for a raise. While my husband went from job to job, I stayed at the same company and kept us covered with health insurance and a stable income. Another turning point was when he became physically abusive and pushed me around our house in a rage. I knew I was no match for him physically and that it would only get worse. Not long after, I finally stood up to him and told him I was divorcing him. The Lord gave me a very pointed scripture in Isaiah 51: 12-16 that helped me take this step; it was the door to leave the hell I’d been living in. I took the step I’d feared for so many years.

**Deborah** – A turning point came when after many attempts I found the courage to try one more time. I believe only God gave me the determination to have a glimmer of hope and an angel of mercy. The only explanation for my survival is the hand of God. The threats were still there and intensified. An attempt was made to set my car on fire. By this time I had no emotional support from family or friends. A school counselor for one of my children listened to my frenetic plea for
help. She and her husband helped me secure safe housing and helped me establish a line of credit to purchase a used car for me and my children.

**Alicia** – He is now remarried (to his 5th wife, I was number 4) and living in another state. He has not changed. I am now an American citizen, a college graduate, and domestic violence advocate.

**Betty** – He is now living with and caring for a quadriplegic man in exchange for room and board. His school had forced him into retirement to avoid the charges, which they said they could win if they took to court. (That was years ago; today it would be all over the papers and he definitely would have been arrested and charged.) I am now divorced and living on my own in a different city. I am disabled and work part time as a tutor in a learning center. My children continue to have many struggles.

**Carla** – He is now quite messed up; that’s all I can say; I try to keep my distance. I am leaning heavily on the Lord and loving the beautiful relationships I’ve found as a result of opening up, pouring out of my heart all these secrets that were hidden.

**Deborah** – He is now deceased. I am currently speaking out about domestic violence. I am active in several community groups with the primary goal of providing educational resources and raising awareness in churches and faith communities.

**Alicia** – One place where I found help through the experience was from a simple little card that offered a relationship check-up. Inside it had a list of abusive behaviors; if you could check off even one that was occurring in your relationship, it had a list of domestic violence agencies to call for help. I called and received counseling. I was so relieved to meet people who believed me and understood what I had gone through. I learned that I wasn’t crazy; nor did I need to be ashamed of what happened to me.

**Betty** – One place where I found help through the experience was at the Domestic Violence Shelter. They provided me with free counseling and helped me make the decision to leave after 27 years of marriage. They even went with me to look at mobile homes so I wouldn’t have to go alone.

**Carla** – One place where I found help through the experience was the very safe place I found in a small circle of women in a Bible study together. I was validated and never felt shamed in that safe place. I found healing there and am continuing on with that.

**Deborah** – Places where I found help through the experience were in psychiatric therapy, spiritual counseling, reaching out to others, developing my personal relationship with Jesus Christ.

**Alicia** – If you remember one thing about my story, remember this: I was introduced to religion through my abuser, who then used it as another tool to control me. Looking back I can see so many ways in which my church could have helped me. Instead, I felt utterly let down and abandoned. I isolated myself from the church because I was ashamed of his behavior and no one reached out to me.

**Betty** – If you remember one thing about my story, remember that it took time to recognize the mess my children and I were in. Finding help and accepting it was
essential. Prayer, spending time with God, and journaling gave me more insights. I didn’t know what to do all at once, but I stuck with it. I found that I had more strength than I thought I did, and made changes that I never thought I could. Staying in the relationship damaged my children, but it would have grown even worse if I did not finally figure it out. I have become wiser, stronger and closer to God through it all.

Carla – If you remember one thing about my story, remember that hiding abuse allows it to thrive in darkness. God loves to expose and uncover so He can bring healing. Not to shout your problems from a rooftop but to find safe places to lay these matters out and get help. Stay committed to the fact that God loves His daughters! He made marriage as a wonderful thing; it's not designed to cover abuse.

Deborah – If you remember one thing about my story, remember, help is available, you can become a survivor! I was a victim, I’m now a survivor!!

Survivor Stories Discussion Questions:

- What did you particularly notice, or what stood out to you, as the stories were read? What if anything surprised you about these stories?
- Each survivor’s story is unique, yet there are themes that emerge in each one. What are some of the common themes that appear?
- The dynamic of power and control is at the heart of abuse. Take a minute to look at the power and control wheel. What are some of the behaviors from the wheel that occur in these survivor stories?
- Looking at how these survivors found (or didn’t find) help, what role can the church play in responding to Domestic Violence?

Prayer Thoughts:

Pray for those who have survived abuse:
- To find a compassionate, listening ear
- To find the protection and help that they need
- To understand that they are a person of infinite worth and are loved by the Lord

Pray for those who have abused:
- To realize the harm they are causing and seek professional help
- To begin to un-learn harmful behavior and re-learn positive ways of relating
- To understand that they are a person of infinite worth and are loved by the Lord

Pray for the Church:
- To open their eyes to the truth about Domestic Violence
- To respond to Domestic Violence with compassion, support and justice
- To hold those who abuse accountable, so that the abuse ends
Physical and sexual assaults, or threats to commit them, are the most apparent forms of domestic violence and are usually the actions that allow others to become aware of the problem. However, regular use of other abusive behaviors by the batterer, when reinforced by one or more acts of physical violence, make up a larger system of abuse. Although physical assaults may occur only once or occasionally, they instill threat of future violent attacks and allow the abuser to take control of the woman's life and circumstances.

The Power & Control diagram is a particularly helpful tool in understanding the overall pattern of abusive and violent behaviors, which are used by a batterer to establish and maintain control over his partner. Very often, one or more violent incidents are accompanied by an array of these other types of abuse. They are less easily identified, yet firmly establish a pattern of intimidation and control in the relationship.