

The Resource Center Newsletter

The Role of Faith Leaders in Community Coordinated Response Teams

By: Rev. Michael L. Ten Haken

I was easily the dumbest person in the room. Here I was, a Christian minister in a room full of attorneys, judges, and courthouse administrators; law enforcement, corrections, and probations officers; victim services, child protection, and legal aid advocates. They were tossing around terms and acronyms and speaking a language that I felt like everyone understood but me. I was completely lost. But I kept showing up month after month. Eventually, I swallowed my pride and just started leaning over to the person next to me and asking my questions, “What does DANCO stand for?”¹ “What does OFP mean?”² “What’s the difference?” “What are UAs?”³ “What’s a lethality assessment?” So many questions!

That was five years ago when I was asked by an attorney friend, who was also a member of my church, if I was interested in joining a group of people who were getting together to discuss the possibility of starting a domestic violence court in Mille Lacs County, Minnesota. I didn’t know it then, but I know now that I was being asked to become part of a Community Coordinated Response (CCR) Team that would work together to build bridges among all the different people and agencies that work to help victims and their abusers stop the pattern of violence – protecting victims and holding offenders accountable.

It was a novel idea to involve a member of the clergy community in a group like this. But I’m glad to have been asked and now I feel like a true member of the team who has something to contribute to ending domestic violence in the county where I live and serve. Because I’m not involved in this world on a day-to-day basis, I provide a fresh set of eyes. I bring (at least now) a different set of questions to the table that comes from outside the system. As a clergy person I have access to resources through my congregation – like volunteers and a supportive community – that many victims and abusers need, even if they don’t realize it yet.

¹ In Minnesota, a domestic abuse no contact order.

² Order for protection.

³ Urinalyses.

I've also learned just how powerful a weapon spiritual abuse can be and (to my horror and dismay) just how often abusers use religion as a tool to control, manipulate, and confine their victims. This makes everyone involved, regardless of how they feel or what they believe about religion, skeptical or even hostile toward faith and faith communities in general.

Children, in particular, are susceptible to the power and control that comes as a result of spiritual abuse as it makes faith something that is harmful rather than helpful. In their minds, the abusers not only speak for themselves, they also speak for God. To defy them is to defy God. This view of who God is and how he works can and does cause very long-term emotional and spiritual damage that takes years to correct. It makes the very thing that can help them – a positive, supportive faith community that wants to love them – something that seems damaging, manipulative, and vengeful.

Through my CCR involvement, I've been able to remove some of the anger and cynicism that might exist about the church and faith as a result of its misuse and abuse by others. I'm working hard to get those I come in contact with through my work on the CCR to once again (or maybe for the first time) view a local faith community as a place to find healing and restoration and renewed hope.

If you have a CCR or are thinking of starting one, I would strongly urge you to consider asking leaders of your local faith communities if they would be interested in getting involved. Be patient with them if you do – they'll have a lot to learn. But in time, they can provide you with valuable insights and resources that will serve your work well and improve your ability to serve the whole person and the whole family.

Victim services agencies and advocates in my community now feel more comfortable and are more willing to refer survivors of domestic violence and their families to local faith communities. We provide positive programming and supportive role models for them and their children and as a result, they are beginning to see churches and faith leaders as valuable partners in their work. And when survivors and their children do reach out to me (often through referral) and perhaps even show up at a Sunday morning service, I have a much more informed understanding of their experiences. What I have learned allows me to be more sympathetic to their unique needs and has given me the tools to help meet those needs as we offer to walk with them on the journey from victim to survivor.

June 2020

This project was made possible by Grant Number 90EV039-04-00 from the Administration on Children, Youth, and Families, Family and Youth Services Bureau, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Its contents are solely the responsibility of the authors and do not necessarily represent the official views of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

I consider it a privilege to be a member of my county CCR team. I've learned much more from them than they have from me, and I'm a better pastor and community member for it. I'm not the dumbest person in the room anymore. I'm just a person in the room doing my part to help end domestic violence in my community.

Resources:

- <https://www.endabusewi.org/our-work/coordinated-community-response/>
- <https://www.bwjp.org/training/how-do-we-know-how-we-are-doing-evaluation-methods-to-enhance-the-coordinated-community-response.html>
- <https://vawnet.org/sc/role-faith-leaders-and-laity-domestic-violence-prevention-and-intervention>

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