him for help and counsel to “stand up for herself more.” The pastor encouraged her to tell the abuser not to hit her, and to tell him “no” and “fight him off” if she did not want to have sex. The survivor took this advice, and the abuser escalated the violence to the point where the woman nearly took her own life.

Research indicates, though, that female church leaders can also respond with inappropriate, hurtful reactions to victims of abuse. The lack of understanding regarding abuse is not restricted to men.

Perhaps the greatest issue of all regarding ineffective help for women was not being taken seriously by church leaders in whom they have confided. One woman found the courage to share with a church leader her severe abuse, and the pastor replied, “I find that hard to believe. Roger is such a good guy.” She felt the person’s response implied that the abuse was her fault and that she was making the situation up. This woman subsequently fell into a depression that lasted for years.

Seventh-day Adventist Church leaders first began officially expressing concern about domestic abuse in the early 1990s. In 1995, at the fifty-sixth General Conference session held in Utrecht, the Netherlands, church administrators cited abuse as one of the six major issues confronting the world church, and the first official statement regarding abuse and family violence was released to the press. A statement is a good first step; however, what happens among local church members and leaders when domestic violence occurs? Our research does not answer this question, but strategies for prevention and education are included with this article. (See sidebar titled “What Can Be Done?” on p. 12.)

The following tragic incident highlights the unfortunate impact that can occur when church members respond inappropriately to abuse. Several years ago in a rural Midwestern town with a well-established Adventist church, an emergency room physician was arrested on charges of solicitation for murder. He had tried to hire someone to kill his wife—the worst kind of domestic violence. He had six children. He and his wife were members of no particular church, although he had been reared as an Adventist. The local Adventist church members were well aware of the situation because the man's parents were lifelong members of that church. Then the story hit the local media.

The nearby Baptist church members also tuned in to this news, which was significant in the small rural setting. The day after the story ran, members of the Baptist church brought six bags of groceries and $200 and set them on the woman's kitchen table. Down the road, the pastor of the Adventist church suggested to the parents of the offender that their son might need a copy of Ellen G. White’s Steps to Christ. The victim reported that the Adventist church members did nothing to help address the victim’s needs or those of her children. Today the woman and her children are all members of that Baptist church.

This account may not be considered typical for Seventh-day Adventist Church members in North America as a whole, but it can cause us to conclude that much more work needs to be done. In the name of the One who protected the abused, Adventists ought to be in the vanguard of Christians working to eliminate the tragedy of partner abuse and to design effective ways to care for its victims. A continuous need exists for informed and appropriate action, both by individuals and the church as a whole. The results of our studies on domestic violence among members of the Adventist Church point to the importance of continuing education and awareness-raising events in local congregations and institutional channels.

Ellen G. White tells us in The Desire of Ages, page 637, “When the nations are gathered before Him, there will be but two classes, and their eternal destiny will be determined by what they have done or have neglected to do for Him in the person of the poor and the suffering.”

Our research indicates that we have many members among us who are suffering in their own homes. We must move forward to educate, to protect, and to provide healing environments for our hurting members.

---

1All names used in this article are pseudonyms.
2While not a nationwide, randomized sample, the researchers concluded the results were