

# Holy Nagging: Advocating for Domestic Violence Survivors

United Methodist Women can make the church a safe place  
for all in need of healing and help.

by **RACHEL PATMAN**

Then Jesus told them a parable about their need to pray always and not to lose heart. He said, "In a certain city there was a judge who neither feared God nor had respect for people. In that city there was a widow who kept coming to him and saying, 'Grant me justice against my opponent.' For a while he refused; but later he said to himself, 'Though I have no fear of God and no respect for anyone, yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will grant her justice, so that she may not wear me out by continually coming.'" And the Lord said, "Listen to what the unjust judge says. And will not God grant justice to his chosen ones who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long in helping them?"

Luke 18:1-7

## The Story of the Persistent Widow

On the surface, this story in Luke 18:1-7 is a story about "nagging." It's what children do when they've been in the car too long: When is it my turn to sit up front? She's in my space! He's poking me! Make him stop! No sooner are these disputes settled than they reappear, usually getting more intense with the length of the drive.

This widow, however, is not merely complaining about where she gets to

sit on a car trip, motivated by boredom. Her concern is important enough that she brings it before the judge repeatedly, hoping each time for justice. This persistent request for justice is an engagement in "holy nagging."

Holy nagging means reminding a person, group or social structure to do what is just and merciful in the eyes of the Lord and then reminding them again and again. Holy nagging means taking up the prophetic role to advocate for those who are often given little voice in society, like this widow. We don't even know her name. The details of her dispute have been omitted from the story and ignored by the judge as unimportant.

This is often the case for victims of domestic violence as well. For many, the term "domestic violence" conjures up nameless images of women with make-up and sunglasses concealing black eyes and bruises. These images may be faces from the grocery store or someone we see at a bus stop. We don't know the details of their lives. We haven't heard how they found themselves in abusive situations or what motivates their staying or leaving these relationships.

The reality is, however, that survivors of domestic violence in our world often are people we know. We may not regularly notice signs of physical bat-

tering, but domestic violence encompasses a variety of abusive and controlling behaviors that create emotional scars that never totally disappear.

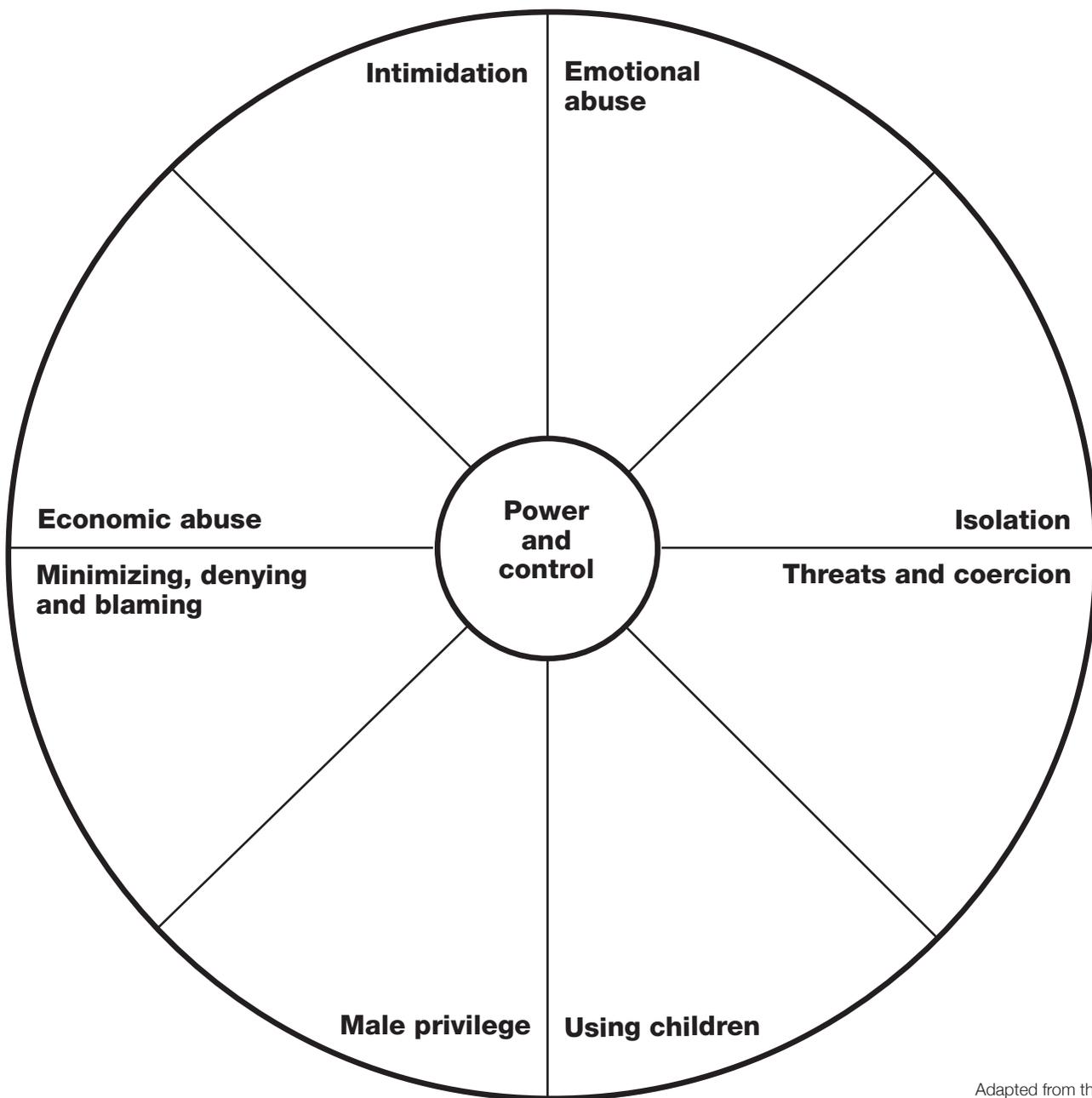
*Note: Let all Bible study participants know ahead of time that you will be discussing domestic violence. Have a trusted pastor or counselor available should a participant need someone to talk to, and make information on local resources for abused persons available. Display the phone number for the National Domestic Abuse Hotline: 1-800-799-SAFE.*

## Power wheel

As a group activity you will name abusive behaviors and list them in a "power wheel." A facilitator or volunteer should draw the wheel on newsprint or white board and fill in the examples as the group mentions them. One example of this wheel can be found at [www.domesticviolence.org/violence-wheel](http://www.domesticviolence.org/violence-wheel), or you can make copies of the example provided here.

On the board or newsprint, draw a large circle to represent the wheel, then a small circle at the center. Write "power and control" in the center, and then draw eight lines to make the spokes of the wheels as if you were drawing a pizza or pie with eight slices. Each section gets one of the following categories: (1) intimidation,

# Domestic Violence Power Wheel



Adapted from the  
Domestic Abuse Intervention Project  
[www.theduluthmodel.org](http://www.theduluthmodel.org)

(2) emotional abuse, (3) isolation, (4) threats and coercion, (5) using children, (6) male privilege, (7) economic abuse and (8) minimizing, denying and blaming. Ask the group to name different types of abusive or controlling behaviors and write them at appropriate places on the power wheel.

As responses are generated by the group, add any of the following that do not get mentioned.

1. Intimidation—Making someone feel afraid: Yelling. Throwing things. Destruction of property. Displaying weapons.
2. Emotional abuse—Intentionally making someone feel worthless: Name-calling. Constantly putting someone down. Apologizing or saying “I love you” in order to manipulate a person to stay in a relationship.
3. Isolation—Cutting off a victim from social support systems: Restricting communication with family and friends. Monitoring the victim’s text messages, e-mails, Internet history and social media. Not allowing the victim to go to church or volunteer in the community.
4. Threats and coercion—Making or carrying out threats of physical harm: Threatening suicide. Threatening to hurt or kill pets. Threatening to hurt or kill family, friends or person being abused. Threatening to humiliate victim by revealing private information.
5. Using children—Using children to manipulate, hurt or humiliate: Threatening to have children taken away/limit visitation. Berating the victim in front of her children. Abusing the children.
6. Male privilege—Considering and treating women as “less than” men:



UNMaine Student Life/Flickr

Students at the University of Maine participate in the Clothesline Project, a project to bear witness to violence against women, as part of the university’s Take Back the Night 2012.

Treating a woman as a servant. Making all major decisions without input as the “head of the house.” Punishing the woman for being “sinful.” Scripture is often used to justify this mistreatment.

7. Economic abuse—Restricting access to financial resources: Not allowing someone to get a job or pursue education. Harassment at work that results in not being able to keep a job. Keeping all financial accounts in the name of the abuser.

8. Minimizing, denying and blaming—Not taking responsibility for the abuse: Blaming the abuse on alcohol or drugs. Blaming the victim. Acting as if abusive incidents did not occur or were imagined by the victim.

### Unjust social structures

*A larger group should divide into smaller groups of three to five, with each group discussing one of the following questions. Then come back together as a large group, with each small group sharing two to three highlights.*

In what ways can unjust social structures in your culture affect victims of domestic violence?

1. How do you think the widow felt about testifying before a judge? How do you think abuse victims feel about testifying in a courtroom? How do you think child victims feel? What if the abuser is in the courtroom during proceedings? What if the judge knows the families involved?

2. Do you think it’s likely the widow had any significant family support? Why or why not? What might it be like to be in an abusive situation and have little or no family support? What if abuse was an expected norm in your family?

3. Financial needs are often assumed as the reason for the widow’s visits to the judge as she did not have a husband to provide for her. How might the following monetary issues affect victims of domestic violence: child support, alimony, minimum wage, public assistance, child care, health care, legal fees, safe housing?

### Group discussion

- Who are the persistent widows advocating for victims in your community?
- When is nagging just complaining and when is it “holy nagging?”
- Why is God different from the unjust judges of the world?
- How is God calling you and your church to persistently advocate for victims of domestic violence as they encounter unjust judges?

### Closing activity

As a group, look at the potential in your local United Methodist Women or your church. What gifts or resources do you have that would be helpful in advocating for victims of domestic violence? What things might be within your col-