

ADDRESSING TEEN DATING VIOLENCE IN OUR COMMUNITIES

By Rev. Lizann Bassham

Nina was both an athlete and a scholar. She was one of the stars of her competitive high school volleyball team, and made the honor list every semester. She and her whole family were very involved in our local church and she was a student leader of the youth group. Mike was from a nearby local church of the same denomination. He was determined to get good grades so he could go into the police academy after he graduated. The summer between Nina's sophomore and junior years and Mike's junior and senior years, they met at church camp and began dating. Nina had dated a bit before then, but Mike was her first serious boyfriend.

They both had a large group of friends, some of which overlapped because of church camp. Both had busy schedules and strong individual interests. Both had a love of church and camp and over the next couple years volunteered as junior leaders for the younger youth groups and as counselors at church summer camp for elementary kids.

In Nina's freshman year of college I found myself sitting with her in the county court house as she petitioned for a restraining order against Mike. What happened? For those of you who have dealt with domestic violence, this story is too familiar.

Early in their relationship Mike was romantic and attentive. They began to spend more and more time together and less time with their separate friends and interests. Mike began wanting to know where Nina was when she wasn't with him, and became jealous of her time

spent with others. At first Nina, who was new to the world of boyfriends and dating, assumed this was normal and that it was what happened when couples got serious. Then Mike started calling their mutual friends to make sure Nina was where she said she was. By the middle of her senior year she felt very uncomfortable and eventually suggested that they break up. Mike said he was sorry and promised to stop bothering her friends. He told her he was just stressed by his first year of junior college and asked for another chance. Being that this was Nina's first serious relationship, she didn't really have anything to compare it to, except T.V. and movies, and so she relented assuming that things would get better and that he was acting so jealous because he really loved her. She did note that her father never treated her mother like Mike treated her, but she thought that was because her parents had been married for twenty years and weren't as passionately in love as she and Mike.

Despite Mike's strong objections, Nina decided to go away to a college about four hours from where she lived. He became more jealous and began calling her several times a day, demanding to know where she was and who she was with. When she didn't immediately call him back he began driving to her college town to find her. Twice while he was there he threatened to beat up two of her male friends. At this point Nina realized that this was not a healthy relationship and that she needed to end it. She met Mike back home one weekend and broke up with him. The following week he drove to her college dorm, parked his truck under her window, climbed on the hood and began yelling until she came out with two friends. He pushed her friends and tried to get her into the truck with him. She refused, pushed him away and fled back into the dorm to call the police.

The story of Nina and Mike is just one early story from my twenty-five years as a youth minister. Over the years I have encountered many stories like Nina's and Mike's and have come to understand how important it is that those of us who work with adolescents take a serious interest in their prayer and spiritual lives *and* develop programs in our faith communities to help adolescents navigate the world of dating.

Teen dating violence is nothing new, and as with adult domestic violence, it can be physical and/or emotional, and be perpetrated by both genders. I recently had a high school senior tell me, "It happens all the time, guys tend to try and control their girlfriends physically, and girls tend to use emotional blackmail to control the guys." Statistically it cuts across culture, class, geography, sexual orientation, and faith.

Several factors can intensify the situation. First of all there's the deep feelings and passion of simply being an adolescent. Second, the frontal lobes of our human brains don't fully develop until sometime in our twenties, leaving us looking like adults without the adult ability to fully understand consequences, or have fully developed impulse control. Technology has also added a new twist to unhealthy teen relationships. Because of cell phones and social media, it is now possible for controlling teens to keep tabs on their partners 24/7.

The way our culture is currently set up, average high school students spend approximately 90% of their waking hours with their peers. Most of their ideas about relationships come from interacting with each other, and from T.V. and movies. While high school students often look and act like they "know it all," the truth is that they don't. They need healthy adults in their lives to help them think through the hormonal haze of their junior and

senior high school years.

Many faith communities and agencies now have policies in place, and clear directions, if there is any suspicion of child abuse. We need to do the same around teen dating violence. Trainings on the topic for adults who work with youth are important. It's also good to have clear policy guidelines for adults working with youth to know how to handle information they may receive from youth about unhealthy relationships.

Faith communities and other groups can create prevention programs to help teens learn the warning signs of abusive relationships, and develop the skills to discern the difference between affection and control. One such preventative resource is the FaithTrust Institute's curriculum "Love--All That and More" a six session program for high school age youth.

Going through adolescence is an exciting, high-wire adventure. As adults, let's try to do what we can to help make sure they have the tools they need to keep their balance, and a safely net under them when they fall.

Rev. Lizann Bassham has over twenty years of experience in the field of youth ministry. An ordained minister in the United Church of Christ, she is adjunct faculty for the Graduate Theological Union and Pacific School of Religion in Berkeley where she teaches courses on various aspects of ministry with youth, and sexuality education. She is the co-author of several curricula on issues of sexuality and spirituality, relationships, confirmation, and youth ministry, as well as being a national consultant in those areas.