Domestic Abuse

Part 1 of 2: Challenges Facing Victims of Domestic Violence
with Darrell Bock, Michelle Woody
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Welcome to The Table where we discuss issues of God and culture, and our topic for today is domestic abuse. It’s a complicated topic, a very complex human story topic, if you will, and with me I have Michelle Woody, who is in our counseling department, our newest member of the counseling department. She is a teaching rookie.

Yes, I am.

And we’re really pleased to have her. I’m going to have Michelle share with us a little bit of her background and why she is qualified to talk about this with us.

All righty, well, thank you very much. Yes, I am a rookie as you said, just coming into the counseling department here. I’m excited to be here. I did graduate with a counseling degree from here in 2010. After leaving in 2010, I was the executive director of a home for boys who have substance abuse issues here in Dallas. In fact, on the south Dallas side, right near Fair Park. And what I found was this was not only a complex issue, but there were a lot of family-related issues, domestic violence being one of the chief problems and challenges that not only the boys had, but their families did, as well. Mainly, single moms.

Now, you also—do you have a daughter that went to USC or were you out at USC? What’s that part of the connection?

Yes, in fact, both are true. I have a daughter who graduated from USC with her bachelor’s in 2009. She went away to teach English in South Korea for two and a half years.

Oh, wow.

She is now currently at USC getting a master’s and she will graduate this year. And I decided after working with these adolescents and trying to work with the school district here in Dallas that I needed more education to really help this at-risk population and these parents, so I too decided to go to USC and my daughter and I will graduate together.

And what did you do at USC?
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*Michelle Woody* My degree is in education psychology and the sole purpose was to work towards helping to motivate those who didn’t have an interest in learning.

*Darrell Bock* Now, the DISD connection is a new thing that I wasn’t aware of before. So what did you do with them?

*Michelle Woody* Well, as a part of our residential program, the boys had to work with an in-home teacher that they had. The problem was the age ranges were 13 to 17, and all the boys were in one room and this teacher had the task of teaching boys who typically had been truant and not been to school at all and they had to somehow have a curriculum that would meet the needs of all those boys during the 30 days that they were with us—

*Darrell Bock* And they were all different places.

*Michelle Woody* All of them were in different places. So that was a challenge, so I tried to come up with interventions on my own. I have a lot of experience, just general interest, with my own children, of course. I have three children who’ve gone to different types of schools over the years. And so I just came up with things that might help these boys, but it wasn’t enough to impress the district and they wanted more credentials, so I helped them with that.

*Darrell Bock* So that was actually why you pursued the education is you were trying to get credential to do the DISD work.

*Michelle Woody* Yes, so that I could do more counseling interventions with the population that really needed it.

*Darrell Bock* Well, now, that’s so fascinating. I don’t know whether to pursue that line. Let me stay here for just a little while. So you were dealing with basically adolescents and what you were finding was that the substance abuse issue—I’ll ask it this way—was kind of a compensation for other things that were going on in their life. Would that be a fair way to say things?
Michelle Woody: That is an accurate picture of these boys. Students who felt marginalized, students who did not have an interest in school, those who moved several times, never were in a stable environment at home or in school because there were so many moves either caused by parents, lack of parents in the home, having to be within either a foster care environment or other type environment. They were emotionally drained and unprepared to even socialize with other students in appropriate ways. A lot of them were in gangs, and it was just difficult.

Darrell Bock: And so I take it that any church contact with these families and kids is pretty remote because of their family situation, the personal situations which they found themselves in.

Michelle Woody: Interestingly enough, in our particular center that we had, the founder of that center, she died right before I finished my degree, which is why I was asked by the board to be the interim executive director. She had those boys on Sunday go to our church, and her view was that if they can just hear a positive word, hear a word from the Lord and just listen and be comforted in that environment, that it would help to change their lives.

Darrell Bock: So she was trying to supply something that, generally speaking, they were lacking in their development.

Michelle Woody: Yes.

Darrell Bock: Interesting. Well, that does paint an interesting picture and, of course, what this raises is that domestic abuse isn’t just about husbands and wives.

Michelle Woody: No, it isn’t.

Darrell Bock: It’s a much broader topic. Let’s go ahead and kind of dive in with that as the background. It’s an interesting portrait that you’ve pictured. Let’s talk about domestic abuse. So what is it and why do you think the church struggles to deal with this area?
Michelle Woody: Okay. Domestic abuse basically involves behaviors. Behaviors—one person making the attempt to control another person. And this manifests itself in a number of ways: physically, emotionally, sexually. And the main reason, I believe, why churches are reluctant to get involved is, number one, they don’t want to appear to be judgmental. They don’t want to appear to be involved in a personal or private matter. It’s one thing to talk about your spiritual development, your spiritual growth. Most churches, especially in Texas and in this region, we can do a lot of things to help that. We have a lot of programs, we have things for the entire family, a one-stop shop that works. But we don’t really know how to help someone develop into being a man or being a woman. And even when we talk about it from the pulpit, when the messages are given about Ephesians 5, what does it take to really be in a right relationship. We don’t know how to translate that or communicate that effectively one-on-one. So it just requires more time than most churches are either equipped to handle and the pastor in our mega-church environment here, especially, just can’t—doesn’t have the resources or the time to do it.

Darrell Bock: So what that means is that unless there are people who are involved like you are, who’ve decided to, you know, “I think this is a calling and a vocation to pursue and the institutional church isn’t really set up to deal with this very well, so I think I’ll go into this area and minister to people who find themselves in this position.” It’s not going to happen without that, is it?

Michelle Woody: Exactly. It’s not. The other issue is that most churches, while some do have counseling programs, counseling staff members, not everyone does. And so it’s just very difficult for people to find the right resources.

Darrell Bock: So we’re dealing with various kinds of behaviors where one person can control the other person. I think most people, when they think of domestic abuse, think of it as being almost exclusively physical—someone beating up someone or something like that—but it actually is more broad ranged than that. Is that correct?

Michelle Woody: Absolutely. I’ve even seen instances, and I’m sure most of the audience has seen the same, even in stores, even if you go in the market where you see the male figure or the husband, if you will, walking in front of the wife and she may even ask, “May I put something in the basket?”
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Darrell Bock

Oh, wow.

Michelle Woody

Or you see if something is placed in the basket, if that’s not an approved item, it’s taken out of the basket in a way that makes it clear it shouldn’t be there. So there are verbal and then there are non-verbal cues that you can see. And I’ve seen it all the time and I’ve tried to make eye contact with that wife if I felt that, you know, there was some injustice there, just so there’s an encouraging look. So it’s very broad.

Darrell Bock

But is it husbands and wives only? Can be parents and kids in the way that parenting takes place, as well?

Michelle Woody

Parents, kids, pets, any part of that family or that environment. Our other complication is that so many of our couples today may not be married. There’s cohabitation. So there are other factors. The single mom who has a boyfriend in the house. The young adolescent, young man who hears his mother either being, in his view, verbally or physically abused in some way. There’s anger there. There’s frustration, there’s resentment towards both the mother and the other, the spouse or that other person. So there are all these things that go on and so all of this makes it complicated for the family because that student doesn’t know how to handle it, there’s truancy there and other issues. Not to mention that most the statistics tell us that when we have families where there is domestic violence, there’s a high probability that those children will also become those who either victimize or perpetrators of violence as adults.

Darrell Bock

It’s amazing. I mean, if you think about that, that the behavior gets mirrored and passed down. You hear similar statistics with things like alcoholism and that kind of thing. So in one sense it isn’t so surprising. You mentioned statistics and I know you brought some, so why don’t you tell us what some of the statistics are here.
Michelle Woody: Well, first of all, it’s alarming and I think we need to just preface it with that. One in four women will experience domestic violence in their lifetime. That is a staggering statistic, and what it says is even as we sit in our congregations and as we look around and just being there yesterday—everyone looked great, it was a great day yesterday—just count. One in four. Every four people, potentially there could have been domestic violence. Worse, one in three teenagers, and that’s really my sweet spot because I work with teenagers, one in three teenage girls will be abused by potentially their boyfriend. Someone they know well. That also is discouraging. But in addition to that, we know that 1.3 million domestic violence cases are reported every year. So many more go unreported.

Darrell Bock: Yeah, that’s the next question.

Michelle Woody: And not only that, but at least 85 percent of those who are victims are women.

Darrell Bock: So it’s everywhere.

Michelle Woody: It’s everywhere we turn. And if we go globally, it probably is even more staggering than that.

Darrell Bock: Wow. And so most of these crimes go unreported. I do know from my own experience with the police—we had an assignment, this is a 40 year old story, but it’s worth telling. We had an assignment for one of our classes at SMU which we were required to ride for one day with a policeman here in Dallas. And on the day that I did there were a couple of domestic incidents involved and what was interesting was to watch the police deal with and in some cases be hesitant to get involved because of the legal restrictions that exist in terms of their ability to get involved unless there’s a formal charge or something like that. They can be called and come, but if the person involved doesn’t want to really press the matter, then they basically have to walk away. And so there’s that dimension of the unreported or the desire not to make matters worse. And another reality that comes sometimes is that when someone does that, they bring in the police, but they don’t issue a charge. All they’ve done is put themselves back in the same environment with the person now angry at them that they even brought it to some form of public attention.
Michelle Woody

Right. It’s interesting that you say that, because my dissertation work in Los Angeles was done at two of the 20 detention centers, juvenile detention centers in southern California. It was surprising to me that there were students there—and these are all, again, 13 to 17 year olds—some had not been in a formal school environment for more than seven months. In their entire school career. I just find that staggering because for most of us, even if our children miss school a day or two the office is calling home to see are they sick, what’s going on, is there a note? But they hadn’t been in school at all. What I found in doing that research there was that a lot of these environments, there’s a fear that if there’s—especially in a low SES—or low socioeconomic environment—there that if there’s funding from the government, they don’t want to report any type of domestic violence or anything that will draw attention to themselves from the law because they don’t want the children taken away from the home, they don’t want child protective services to come in, because anything that points to negative-type behaviors or an unfit environment means that we’re going to lose our income. So it’s a complex situation and I was really surprised. I just wasn’t aware of that and so that’s another reason why we don’t have as much reporting. We have other situations where teenage pregnancy is a more viable alternative than to stay in the house where the student was. And so that’s another reason, or another factor, that plays into this. And so I understand your story about the police. It’s complicated.

Darrell Bock

So we’ve got it everywhere, there’s a lot of domestic abuse, we see women and/or children controlled by or impacted by—this is one of the things that I think we don’t appreciate, is that when there’s domestic violence in a home and there are kids in the home, there’s collateral damage.

Michelle Woody

Yes. Yes. Yes.

Darrell Bock

And that collateral damage is severe. We’ll be talking about that a little more. So we’re dealing with physical or emotional abuse. It can be intimidation, it can be isolation, it can be economic abuse—there are just a variety of ways in which this can be dealt with. Okay, let’s deal with some audiences here. We said it’s there, it’s present, it’s a part of the lives of some people, far too many people. So let’s deal with you are a victim, okay, you are a person in such a situation. What could you do, what should you do, what should you not be afraid of doing, if I can say it that way?
Michelle Woody: Okay. One of the main phrases that I heard over and over again, “I don’t wanna be a snitch.” And if this person, if I tell, they may go to prison for a long time or there may be repercussions from their friends. And so that’s a dynamic that had to be worked through. Are you afraid of what the person will think about you or what the person will do to you? And we had to really get through that. But as a victim, the first thing you have to do is just know that it can’t be a secret. A victim has to make up their mind that there has to be a change for their well-being.

Darrell Bock: And the only way to bring change is to report.

Michelle Woody: You must report. And the hardest thing is to get that victim to report. And the other dynamic psychologically—when there’s a blaming that’s going on, when there’s an erosion of their own self-esteem, of their own confidence. That says to them, “I can’t do anything,” and “Who will believe me? I’ve done so many things that are wrong, I’ve made so many mistakes. No one’s going to believe me.” And so part of the whole effort to help the victim is to help the victim believe more in themselves.

Darrell Bock: Okay, so I mean there are probably a variety of ways that someone can report. They could call the police, they could tell a friend, they could call some type of—I take it that there are domestic abuse hotlines or something like that where they could seek a place of refuge. So those are three that come immediately to mind. Am I missing any?

Michelle Woody: They could go to their church. If they are churched or if they have a church environment, they can go to the church. Our challenge is do they trust the members of the church and do they have family members there at the church? The hotline is a very good one, though, if they don’t have friends. Most times when victims are in this type of environment, it’s almost like a classroom. If you look to your left and to your right, we’re all in the same boat, or at least we view ourselves as being in the same boat. So they don’t think they can receive any help from the friend as much.
So you actually have some numbers here that people can call. There’s a domestic violence hotline, which is I guess 800-799-SAFE, which is 7233. There’s a teen dating abuse hotline. We haven’t even talked about that category, really. 866-331-9474. There’s information on the Web, loveisrespect.org, which is another way to get at it, or you can text at what is LOVEIS, which is 22522. So there’s a variety of ways to make contact with various organizations that are in a position to help you and have—I take it that if you call a hotline what you can expect is these are services that have trained people in place to help you work through what it is that you’re reporting.

Sure. The beauty of both of these hotlines, these are 24 hours a day, 7 day a week hotlines. So you’re not going to get—

“Call me back in the morning.”

Yes, or “We’re never going to be available.” “We’re off on the weekends.” So that’s helpful. But for even the teen dating hotline and also their website, it’s very user friendly, which I love for teenagers, so they’re big prompts and you can see what you’re trying to get there, but I also love that you can text because so many teenagers today in our culture, they don’t wanna talk on the phone.

That’s right. If I can speak through my phone, I will do it.

That’s right.

Isn’t that amazing? So okay, so that’s how you report, and then what you’d expect in reporting, depending on whether you take a legal approach or you take this service approach is getting help. I mean, one of the issues that comes up for the victim is, “Should I stay in the environment or not?”
Michelle Woody: Yes, yes. I think the issue from the outside looking in is it’s easy to say, “Of course you should leave. He’s giving you a black eye, he’s broken your ribs, he’s threatening to take the children. Why wouldn’t you leave?” There may not be any place to go. So many times I saw—and really kind of stressful—I saw perhaps a mother with five children without knowing any of the fathers. And none of the fathers—don’t know whether it’s for the children and they’re not present in the household, but that mom still has to take care of those kids, has limited skills, what is the alternative if I leave? And so really becomes a challenge.

Darrell Bock: Because in her mind, she’s not just leaving, but she could be abandoning her children in the same move.

Michelle Woody: Abandoning the children or just not having a place for them, no alternative for the five children. And a lot of times the other challenge is we’ve seen where the mother will leave the younger children with whoever is the oldest child, and that oldest could be 10 or 11 and they have to take care of the infant or the toddler while the mother is with either the boyfriend or whomever it is in another location. And she may come occasionally just to check on the children, but that’s how we end up with so many of the younger children not going to school.

Darrell Bock: So if you end up in a legal process or you end up in one of these services, then, obviously you’ve made a decision to deal with this, but it’s going to be a long-term solution. This is not something you fix overnight.

Michelle Woody: Our social services departments across this country are all overwhelmed with the number of cases that they have. Occasionally we will see the outcome of those cases that were missed on the news where a child was abandoned, a child was abducted, something happened there, so yes, it’s a long-term process, and your case may not even be worthy enough for the social services department in your particular state or local municipality to take because of some of the other cases that are more in crisis than yours.
Wow. Well, it’s clear we’re not painting a pretty picture here. It’s a difficult topic. Okay, so that’s—we’ve kind of walked through your victim. Let’s go to the next category. What some victims will do is they’ll tell a friend. So now the question is, if you’re a friend who hears about a case of domestic abuse, what advice do you give to the person who hears the report?

The friend, assuming that friend is not one who will say, “In the name of the Lord, I will pray for you,” but then quickly either text another friend or calls another friend just to share in the name of the church and the name of this victim this is what happened. If this is a true friend, that friend first of all should not be judgmental. The friend should be encouraging; the friend should also be the listener. Sometimes all the victim needs is someone who’s going to be sympathetic, someone who’s calm, someone to hear them. They want to hear their voice. So many victims can’t hear their voice in the midst of a feeling overwhelmed by their abuser.

So is there any other responsibility that a friend should feel when—

The friend, I think—it’s delicate, there’s no right or wrong, and it certainly depends on the situation, but their friend has to encourage their friend, the victim, to move in a direction of wanting to make a change. And if they do help them to identify who they can talk to. We hope it would be a church, a pastor, a pastor that has either resources or access to referrals. If they don’t have their own counseling center but refer them to someone. Legally, if law enforcement has to be involved, that’s always good. However, again, it’s very delicate. In our time of limited or no resources for health insurance, people are reluctant to go to their hospital or their local doctor because of that and so they start to do things that most people would not do if they did have those resources available.

This raises a question since you mentioned doctors, so what are the reporting requirements that people have if they come across a situation like this, a doctor, a counselor, a pastor—are there reporting requirements that come when you have knowledge of something like this?
Michelle Woody

Absolutely. We have to report. And certainly if there are children involved, we have to report even if we suspect that children have been abused. A lot of times adults will hide the injuries that they have, but yes, the doctors have to report, as well. So, again, that’s why the victims are so reluctant to come forward, because they just don’t wanna do that. Taking children away is a real fear that victims have even when they themselves are abused.

Darrell Bock

So there’s a sense in which I’m hearing between the lines that this is not going forward if a person who’s trapped in domestic abuse doesn’t take the view of things have gotta change, and I’ve got to trust the process here to take care of me.

Michelle Woody

Right. Again, most people are looking at this from the standpoint that they have gotten the short end of the stick in life. So they’re not that willing to trust that what you’re saying, dear friend, and I do respect you, that you’re going to help me. And I hear the pastor, and I’m sitting in the sanctuary every week, but the pastor doesn’t know. His wife is beautiful, and it seems to me that he treats his children well, he’s not beating the children and he’s not beating his wife. How can he relate to me? They’re just not hearing it.