

Faith groups respond to rise in domestic violence amid global pandemic

by [Dawn Araujo-Hawkins](#) in the [May 20, 2020](#) issue



A woman hangs a banner from her balcony with the number of a domestic violence hotline during a national lockdown aimed at stemming the spread of coronavirus, in Beirut, Lebanon, on April 16. (AP Photo/Bilal Hussein)

When local and state governments across the nation began instituting shelter-in-place policies back in March, there was immediate concern for the risk staying at home would pose for survivors of domestic violence.

Marianne Hester, a Bristol University sociologist who studies abusive relationships, told the *Chicago Tribune* that domestic violence goes up whenever families spend more time together—like during Christmas and summer vacations.

Indeed, many communities have observed an upswing in the number of reported domestic violence incidents.

According to Voice of America, in one week of mandatory lockdown in France, domestic violence rates increased by a third. During South Africa's first week of sheltering in place, authorities received 90,000 reports of violence against women. The *Guardian* reported that the number of domestic killings in the United Kingdom more than doubled during the first three weeks of lockdown.

In the US, the CEO of the National Domestic Violence Hotline told *Time* magazine the organization had seen a growing number of callers saying their abusers were using the pandemic to isolate them from friends and family and, in some cases, were withholding money or medical assistance.

There is concern even in localities where domestic violence calls have gone down. In Los Angeles, for instance, domestic violence calls to the police declined 18 percent from March 19 to April 15. But officials there told ABC News that what they believe is happening is that survivors are stuck at home with their abusers and are unable to alert authorities—even though the actual abuse is increasing.

Faith groups worldwide are responding in various ways to what has been dubbed part of a dual COVID-19 crisis.

The Monday after Easter, Pope Francis prayed for all women—but particularly those currently trapped at home with their abusers.

"Sometimes, [women] risk being subjected to violence because of a living situation in which they bear too great a burden," he said. "We pray for them that the Lord would give them strength and that our communities would support them together with their families."

In Buffalo, New York, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints donated \$10,000 to aid pandemic-related domestic violence relief efforts.

"As Christians, we follow the teachings of Jesus Christ by looking for ways to serve those in need," Nathan Pace, president of the church's Buffalo Stake, told local

media. “This donation is a way to help those most vulnerable who are not safe inside their own homes during this uniquely stressful time.”

Welcome Church in Surrey, England, is hosting a virtual walk around the world to raise funds for a local domestic violence shelter that has vowed to stay open during the pandemic.

On April 26, Union Baptist Church in Winston-Salem, North Carolina, hosted a special virtual sermon about domestic violence, tweeting: “With the increase of domestic violence due to COVID-19, hopefully this message can strengthen those who have survived or [are] surviving these conditions.”

The Church of England added a specific COVID-19 and domestic abuse page to the Safeguarding portion of its website. The page includes information for survivors as well as a guide for people who are concerned for someone else’s safety.

Ambassadors from the World Council of Churches’ Thursday in Black campaign (in which participants wear black clothing and a special pin on Thursdays to raise awareness about gender-based violence) issued a statement on April 23 urging WCC member churches to “actively help raise awareness, protect against, and prevent rising levels of gender-based violence during this global COVID-19 pandemic. . . . During these times, and always, we must enable and promote safe spaces for all.”

Tricia Bent-Goodley, a social work professor at Howard University, told ABC News that even though many churches remain closed right now, faith groups can still make a difference for survivors of domestic abuse.

This is an opportunity for “our faith-based community to say, ‘Hey! We may not be having a service, but our doors are still open, we are still present,’” she said.