The Response of Religious Leaders to Intimate Partner Violence: Overcoming the "Holy Hush"

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The Response of Religious Leaders to Intimate Partner Violence: Overcoming the
“Holy Hush”

A Dissertation Presented in
Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy
By
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May 24th, 2016

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Biography

Jaclyn Danielle Houston-Kolnik (formerly Jaclyn Danielle Houston) was born in Campbell, California on March 10, 1989. She graduated from Azusa Pacific University where she received her Bachelor of Arts in Psychology in 2011. She received her Master’s degree in Community Psychology from DePaul University. Her research examines how individuals (i.e., rape victim advocates and the general public) and groups (i.e., religious congregations) understand and respond to violence against women. Jaclyn also conducts evaluations and trainings with community organizations working to address violence against women in order to increase their understanding and strengthen their capacity to respond.
Table of Contents

List of Tables ........................................................................................................... x
List of Figures .......................................................................................................... xi
Abstract ...................................................................................................................... 1
Introduction ............................................................................................................... 3

Intimate Partner Violence ....................................................................................... 5
  Two Primary Models of IPV .................................................................................. 7
  Vulnerability Factors and Protective Factors of IPV ............................................. 9
  Consequences of IPV ........................................................................................... 11
 Disclosure and Help-Seeking ............................................................................... 12
  Disclosure ............................................................................................................. 13
  Help-Seeking ........................................................................................................ 14
  Sources of Help .................................................................................................... 15
  Culture, Help-Seeking, and Disclosure ............................................................... 18
 Best-Practice Responses ......................................................................................... 20
  Individuals ........................................................................................................... 20
  Organizations ....................................................................................................... 21
  Coordinated Community Response .................................................................... 21
  Religious Leaders as Part of a Coordinated Community
    Response ............................................................................................................ 23
 Responses to Perpetrators ...................................................................................... 25
 Why Focus on Religious Leaders and Their Response? ...................................... 29
Understanding the Context of Christianity and Diversity Within

Christianity ............................................................................................................. 31
Christianity and Historical Links to Violence ........................................... 32
Christian Religious Traditions within Protestantism ......................... 34
Black Protestantism: Standing at the Nexus of Religion and Race
........................................................................................................................... 38

Religious Beliefs and Responses to Violence ........................................... 42
Religion and Experiences of IPV ................................................................. 49
Religious Leaders as Responders .............................................................. 49
Survivors’ Experiences and Religious Help-Seeking ............................ 51
Summary ............................................................................................................ 52

Rationale ........................................................................................................... 53
Research Questions .......................................................................................... 55

Method ............................................................................................................. 55
Participants ...................................................................................................... 55
Measurement and Procedures .................................................................. 58
Researcher ......................................................................................................... 60
Analytic Strategy ............................................................................................. 62

Results ............................................................................................................. 68
Definition and Description ......................................................................... 71
Specific Acts .................................................................................................. 72
Composition of Couple/Family ................................................................. 75

Causes ............................................................................................................. 76
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Power and Control</td>
<td>76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cultural Norms</td>
<td>79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal/Environmental Factors</td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religious Beliefs</td>
<td>87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sin</td>
<td>88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shame</td>
<td>91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Worth</td>
<td>94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>God’s Image</td>
<td>95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Justice</td>
<td>96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Suffering</td>
<td>98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Redemption</td>
<td>102</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marriage</td>
<td>105</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender Roles</td>
<td>105</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Divorce</td>
<td>111</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Forgiveness</td>
<td>114</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reconciliation</td>
<td>122</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Role of Leader</td>
<td>126</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supportive</td>
<td>126</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Invited into People’s Lives</td>
<td>128</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Impact of Role on Leader</td>
<td>133</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Response to IPV</td>
<td>135</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wary of Boundaries</td>
<td>135</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Struggles &amp; Tensions</td>
<td>137</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Confront ................................................................. 142
Prayer ................................................................. 144
Utilize Resources .................................................. 146
Established Process .............................................. 148
Community .......................................................... 151
Accountability ...................................................... 152
Intervention/Prevention .......................................... 154
Organization Connections & Needs ......................... 155
Summary and Synthesis of Key Findings ................. 158
Discussion .................................................................. 162
Major Findings and Implications .............................. 163
Implications for Intervention and Collaboration .......... 173
Limitations and Future Research ............................... 175
Conclusion .................................................................. 177
References .................................................................. 179
Appendix A. Recruitment Letter ................................. 198
Appendix B. Interview Protocol ................................. 199
Appendix C. Informed Consent Forms ......................... 202
List of Tables

Table 1. Demographics of Interviewees .......................................................... 57

Table 2. Summary of Themes and Subthemes............................................. 70
List of Figures

Figure 1. Summary Model of the Key Findings from the Present Study ....... 159
Abstract

Intimate partner violence (IPV) continues to be a social problem with many survivors seeking assistance from their religious leaders. In order to understand how to improve the response of religious leaders to IPV, this dissertation explores the various ways religious leaders understand and respond to survivors of IPV and the religious beliefs that may contribute to their response. The responses of religious leaders vary as some may deny or justify the abuse while others may link survivors to resources within the religious congregation or local community. Furthermore, these responses may be shaped by particular religious beliefs such as beliefs about marriage or forgiveness. To pursue this research, I conducted 20 in-depth interviews with Protestant religious leaders. Religious leaders described IPV as certain types of violence that were on a gradation of violence from verbal to physical. This understanding of IPV also shaped religious leader’s responses to violence as physical violence was viewed as most severe and in need of the most immediate, safety-focused response. Throughout the interviews, religious leaders shared how specific religious beliefs contributed to their understanding of IPV, shaped their view of their role as a religious leader, and informed their response to individuals experiencing IPV. For instance, religious leaders understood marriage and divorce differently and this view shaped their views on how to handle IPV between married partners. In their role as a religious leader, leaders clarified their role as a supporter, but not as a counselor. Thus, many religious leaders emphasized the need for referrals to counseling professionals. Some leaders responded to instances of violence directly through pastoral counseling,
accountability, or providing resources, while others emphasized more indirect responses such as prayer or mentioning IPV within their sermons. Lastly, religious leaders discussed what they needed in order to better respond to IPV. Leaders asked for training and resources on how to respond, specifically for responding to challenging cases, working with perpetrators, and for the LGBT community. Findings from this study inform research and trainings for religious leaders and congregations on how to respond to IPV in a way that promotes survivor safety and fosters greater understanding of IPV. Also, results may aid in the creation of protocols for congregations to respond to IPV in ways that align with the religious beliefs and values of the congregation. Finally, findings may provide concrete strategies for religious leaders and congregations to better realize their potential as safe, healing communities for survivors of IPV.
The Response of Religious Leaders to Intimate Partner Violence: Overcoming the “Holy Hush”

Intimate partner violence (IPV), defined as “physical, sexual, or psychological harm by a current or former partner or spouse” (Center for Disease Control and Prevention, 2014), is a pervasive social issue. Indeed, IPV touches all forms of romantic relationships, whether for adolescents (Halpern, Oslak, Young, Martin, & Kupper, 2001; Silverman, Raj, Mucci, & Hathaway, 2001) or adults in same-sex or opposite-sex romantic relationships (Hassouneh, & Glass, 2008; Halpern, Young, Waller, Martin, & Kupper, 2004; Messinger, 2011; Tjaden & Thoennes, 2000). In the United States, a National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence survey of over 16,000 individuals across the nation showed that 35.6% of women and 28.5% of men had experienced intimate partner violence (Black et al., 2011). Globally, approximately one in three women experience intimate partner violence and experiencing such violence decreases a woman’s healthy lifespan by about 5%, highlighting the prevalence and health ramifications of IPV (Nayak, Byrne, Martin, & Abraham, 2003). Regardless of the gender of the survivor, experiences of IPV have been associated with numerous health concerns such as mental illness, depressive symptoms, substance abuse, and physical injury (Coker et al., 2002). Clearly, IPV is a prevalent social issue that warrants further exploration due to both the prevalence and serious health ramifications of this violence.

Individuals who have experienced IPV may seek assistance from a variety of sources and the responses of these individuals and groups may help or harm the
survivor. More than 75% of IPV survivors disclose their experience of abuse with a close friend, family member, religious leader, or some other form of informal support and many also seek help from formal service providers such as healthcare providers or law enforcement (Sylaska & Edwards, 2013). Survivors who seek help may confront victim-blaming attitudes that seem to justify the abuse, negatively impacting the survivor’s experience of seeking help or pursuit of legal action (Nayak et al., 2003). Alternatively, survivors may encounter helpful responses from individuals and organizations who link them to resources and offer support to promote personal safety. Religious congregations are one such organization where congregational leaders and members have a unique opportunity to be responders to survivors of IPV, to connect survivors to resources, to provide social and instrumental support, and for the congregation itself to be involved in the larger community coordinated response to IPV. Thus, the purpose of this study is to examine how religious leaders and congregations respond to IPV.

Interestingly, religious congregations are religious social settings that constitute a community with distinct norms, practices, and beliefs; all of which may shape whether and how well leaders and members respond to IPV with some responses being potentially harmful. Indeed, some religious beliefs and ideologies are used to justify abuse and congregations have often kept a “holy hush” about intimate partner violence (Kroeger & Nason-Clark, 2010; Nason-Clark, 2004). Alternatively, religious leaders may counsel a religious woman that abuse and violence within marriage is not how their religious tradition
understands marriage before God (Nason-Clark, 2009). This example illustrates the complexities in how different types of religious ideologies may emerge as helpful or harmful, with some encouraging the prioritization of personal safety, while others may encourage a survivor to remain silent or to stay in a dangerous situation (Nason-Clark, 2009). Religious leaders also serve a pivotal role in religious congregations as they may not only be direct responders to IPV survivors, but also may create and maintain larger norms within the congregation that shape if and how congregants respond to IPV. Given this central role of leaders, the purpose of this study is to examine how religious leaders respond to survivors of IPV and furthermore, to better understand how specific religious beliefs and ideologies shape this response. In order to situate the study, the literature about the prevalence and nature of IPV is presented, followed by discussions of help-seeking strategies, best-practice responses, responses to perpetrators, and how religious survivors and leaders may understand and respond to IPV in unique ways shaped by their beliefs and values.

**Intimate Partner Violence (IPV)**

IPV is defined by the U.S. government as “physical, sexual, or psychological harm by a current or former partner or spouse” and may manifest in a variety of forms (Center for Disease Control and Prevention, 2014). Prevalence rates suggest IPV is a major public health concern with 10-69% of women around the world reporting intimate partner violence; the range within the United States for women reporting violence from a male partner at any point in their life is 10-34% (WHO, 2002). Examples of violence between intimate partners include
coercion, threats, intimidation, emotional abuse, economic abuse, physical harm, and sexual force or coercion (Kelly & Johnson, 2008). The term “domestic violence” is often used to emphasize the vulnerability of women to experience violence within their own family and home, thus intimate partner violence may be domestic violence, but may also be violence between romantic partners who do not share a home or a family together (Kelly & Johnson, 2008). Researchers stresses the need for even further delineation between types of violence so as to separate situational couple violence (i.e., sporadic, mild outbursts of violence that are not about power or control but about a specific situation), “terroristic control” (i.e., a byproduct of a historical and societal oppression and control of women that often escalates to severe violence), violent resistance (i.e., violence out of self-defense), and mutual violence (i.e., two partners using violence to gain power and control over one another; Johnson, 1995; Johnson & Ferraro, 2000).

Differentiating between types of violence may be particularly important as different types of violence may lead to different consequences for survivors and may be addressed using differing strategies.

When addressing violence between partners, researchers have emphasized that it is crucial to differentiate the type of violence as polices or responses adopting a “one-size-fits-all” approach fail to address the complexity of IPV (Johnson, 2005; Kelly & Johnson, 2008). Furthermore, researchers have called for a focus on the multiple consequences that IPV may have on an individual as there are particular economic, political, social, and religious factors which may impact survivors of IPV (Bell, 2003, Flood & Pease, 2009, Reeves & O’Leary-
Kelly, 2007). I now describe different models of how IPV is formed and perpetuated followed by a brief description of vulnerability and protective factors. This discussion provides a background for how religious leaders may understand IPV and who may be vulnerable to IPV.

**Two primary models of IPV.** It is important to discuss different views of how intimate partner violence begins and is perpetuated. There are two primary perspectives which each hold implications for prevention and intervention of IPV (Morse, 1995). One primary model views IPV through the perspective of family violence. When violence is perpetrated, experienced, or considered normative within a family, individuals are believed to learn patterns of behavior or take part in a family system involving pathological and perpetual violence. This perspective links child and parent spousal abuse to the perpetuation and justification of violence for those who were survivors or witnesses to abuse in the home (Straus & Gelles, 1986). Exposure to violence as a child is associated with poorer health, greater mental distress, and a higher vulnerability of experiencing IPV (Bensley, Van Eenwyk, & Simmons, 2003). Furthermore, witnessing or experiencing violence, specifically in childhood, may lead to an acceptance of violence in relationships and a belief that violence is a normal part of conflict (Jewkes, 2002). Due to these vulnerabilities, researchers emphasize the need to assess victimization and perpetration simultaneously in order to better understand the context in which abuse is normalized and perpetuated (Anderson, 2002). If the family violence perspective is the assumed reason for IPV, this may result in
prevention and intervention efforts that focus on this previous exposure to family violence or more broadly, the family system as a whole.

A second model of IPV is the feminist perspective that links violence between partners to gendered dynamics of power and control (Melton & Belkamp, 2003; Pence & Paymar, 1993). This model purports that abusive behaviors (e.g., isolation, emotional abuse, intimidation, threats, economic abuse, etc.) are fundamentally acts to assert or gain power and control over another individual. These violent and abusive behaviors create a context where sexual and physical abuse are justified and normalized (Kelly & Johnson, 2008; Pence & Paymar, 1993). The feminist perspective of IPV differs from the family violence perspective as it views IPV as a result of an ideology of male superiority (Jewkes, 2002). Jewkes (2002) outlines causes of IPV and notes how gender roles, male sexual entitlement, a low social value of women, and a view of manhood being linked to the control of women have all contributed to an ideology of male superiority that fosters a context for IPV to be normative in society. This feminist perspective assumes male violence against women and statistics demonstrate IPV primarily occurs between male perpetrators and female victims, and while both may be violent in the relationship, women are more likely to be violent in defense of themselves (i.e., violent resistance; Dobash, Dobash, Wilson, & Daly, 2003; Johnson & Ferraro, 2000; Melton & Belkamp, 2003; Morse, 1995). In light of these statistics and norms within society, the feminist perspective may focus prevention and intervention efforts on systems and ideologies of oppression and the perpetuation of gendered violence. The feminist model, along with family
violence model, provide distinct lenses through which to understand and potentially act to address IPV.

**Vulnerability factors and protective factors of IPV.** There are a variety of vulnerability and protective factors related to IPV. Vulnerability factors are factors associated with or that may increase chances of experiencing IPV, while protective factors are factors that serve as a buffer or are protective against experiencing IPV. Understanding these factors may be particularly important, as they may be key factors to address in IPV prevention and intervention efforts.

Research has cited multiple factors that are associated with experiencing IPV and that these factors may interact with one another to create vulnerabilities to IPV (Adams & Campbell, 2012). Indeed, Adams and Campbell (2012) highlight how factors of gender, race/ethnicity, legal status, access to social services, among other vulnerabilities interact with one another to create a context where IPV may be sparked due to stress or perpetuated through stereotypes of normalized violence. Research suggests that low socioeconomic status is a predictor of IPV for both men and women (Caetano et al., 2000; Cunradi et al., 2000). Socioeconomic status may intersect with race/ethnicity to create further vulnerability; statistics suggest that Black couples who lived in lower socioeconomic neighborhoods were at an increased vulnerability of both female-to-male and male-to-female IPV, while only female-to-male IPV was higher for White couples living in low-income neighborhoods (Cunradi et al., 2000). Beyond race/ethnicity, researchers suggest that poverty, unemployment, and immigration status are vulnerability factors to experiencing IPV; and that
race/ethnicity may interact with these factors to create multiplicative vulnerabilities to IPV (Adams & Campbell, 2012; West, 2005). Furthermore, individual factors such as personality traits (e.g., aggression, antisocial) and substance abuse are also vulnerability factors for IPV (WHO, 2002). Taken together, these vulnerability factors are associated with experiencing IPV and may compound together to exacerbate these vulnerabilities.

These vulnerability factors may be further perpetuated and exacerbated by other circumstances in the lives of individuals who experience IPV. For instance, economically many women stay in abusive relationships because they are unable to support themselves financially, either because of difficulty maintaining a job due to welfare requirements, the abuse (Reeves & O’Leary-Kelly, 2007), or the need for child support (Bell, 2003). Perpetrators may also exploit these vulnerability factors by accruing debt in the partner’s name or by disrupting their workplace frequently until the partner loses their job (Brush, 2011). Such manipulative behaviors may be barriers to women leaving an abusive situation because they do not have the financial resources to cover these unforeseen losses.

From a mental health perspective, the co-occurrence of poverty and IPV exacerbates mental health concerns (e.g. PTSD, depression) due to increased stress, powerlessness, and social isolation (Goodman, Smyth, Borges, & Singer, 2009). These factors may continue to isolate survivors of IPV and again may compound to create further vulnerability and exposure to IPV.

Despite these vulnerabilities, many survivors are resilient in the face of IPV and there are a variety of factors that may be protective in the face of
experiencing IPV. Research suggests that strong social networks are a protective factor as family members may denounce the abuse or may provide needed resources to survivors (Liang, Goodman, Tummala-Narra, & Weintraub, 2005). Other protective factors are self-esteem, self-efficacy, spirituality, education, income, and perception of control (Carlson, McNutt, Choi, & Rose, 2002; Coker et al., 2002). Once again, these factors may interact with one another as greater education may increase self-esteem and self-efficacy to further protect against IPV. Survivors have also identified the importance of a safe home environment in protecting against IPV, where young girls and women learn, view, and practice healthy relationships that foster a sense of self-worth (Short et al., 2000). These factors may protect individuals from IPV or may be key facilitators to survivors feeling equipped and safe to seek assistance or leave an abusive situation.

**Consequences of IPV.** These vulnerability and resiliency factors shape exposure and experiences of IPV and the different forms of intimate partner violence (e.g., emotional, physical, or verbal violence) may result in different consequences for the survivor. These consequences pose a serious concern and highlight IPV as a prevalent social issue in need of further attention due to the mental, physical, and spiritual impact on survivors. Experiences of IPV have been associated with major health concerns such as an increase of chronic mental health illness, substance abuse, and physical injury (Coker et al., 2002). The psychological effects of controlling behaviors and violence may include fear, anxiety, and low self-esteem (Kelly & Johnson, 2008). A large number of women who experienced IPV met criteria for depression and posttraumatic stress and
these numbers were especially high for those who had been in controlling, violent relationships (Johnson & Leone, 2000). Additionally, the physical consequences of IPV are often much more severe for women than for men due to differences in physical strength and stature (Dobash, et al., 1992). The short-term and long-term physical consequences may impact survivor’s ability to maintain a consistent job and lead to economic difficulties (Shepard & Pence, 1988). Both of these tactics may create a dependence on the perpetrator for resources or may make it difficult for the survivor to leave due to financial stressors and debt. From these consequences, it is clear that IPV is a serious human rights concern that has severe and multifaceted impacts on survivors. The impacts of IPV may be one motivator for survivors to disclose or seek help for the abuse, discussed in the following section.

**Disclosure and Help-Seeking**

Survivors of IPV may seek resources and help from a variety of individuals, organizations, and communities and may choose whether or not to disclose their experience of IPV. Survivors may navigate disclosure and help-seeking with friends and family or may seek social services such as medical services, social services, counseling, mental health services, religious counseling or clergy, women’s groups, or the criminal justice system (Postmus, Plummer, McMahon, Murshid, & Kim, 2009). These resources may be key for survivors to feel secure enough to leave an abusive situation and may also serve as a buffer to the mental health consequences of IPV through survivors feeling more equipped and supported (Perez, Johnson, & Wright, 2012). There are a variety of factors
that may impact a survivor’s decision to disclose or seek help for their assault and a variety of sources they may utilize ranging from informal to more formal forms of support and assistance.

**Disclosure.** Survivors can choose whether or not to disclose their experience of IPV with others around them and multiple factors may influence their choice to disclose. Disclosure may be sharing their experience of abuse with a close family member or friend or it may be inherent in the process of seeking services or resources. Alaggia, Regehr, and Jenney (2012) examined factors related to women’s disclosure of abuse and noted that a fear of losing family support was a major barrier to disclosure. Survivors may fear that disclosing their experience of abuse may lead to a denial of the experience and further isolation from family members (Trotter & Allen, 2009). Survivors reported that they felt like they could handle the situation or that the situation would change with time as another reason for not disclosing the abuse with either informal (e.g., family members, religious leaders), or formal supports (e.g., hospitals, health clinics, shelters; Nason-Clark, 2009; Odero et al., 2014). Survivors face a general fear over how people and systems will react to or discredit their experience of IPV (Sylaska & Edwards, 2013; Trotter & Allen, 2009). Other barriers survivors have shared to disclosure are shame, embarrassment, and concern that others would try to take control of the situation (Sylaska & Edwards, 2013). Additionally, survivors noted how a normalization of violence within their families or in broader society also served as a barrier to their disclosure (Sylaska & Edwards, 2013; Trotter & Allen, 2009). Across multiple levels (i.e., individual, social
support, and community factors), survivors face a host of barriers that may discourage disclosing their abuse to others.

**Help-seeking.** Help-seeking involves disclosure of the violence with the hope of receiving support (Fanslow & Robinson, 2010). Liang et al. (2005) noted that survivor help-seeking is a process that involves three key steps: (1) defining the problem, (2) deciding to seek help, (3) selecting the source of support. Survivors navigate through help-seeking over time and may cycle through the process of seeking help multiple times as they identify new, pressing needs that arise and new sources of support. The researchers also discussed how different factors at multiple levels may encourage or deter a woman from seeking help such as individual (e.g., comparing situation to others who are “worse off”), interpersonal (e.g., social supports validating or discounting survivor’s stories), and sociocultural factors (e.g., intersecting identities such as gender, class, cultural or religious beliefs; Liang et al., 2005). Furthermore, geographic location of resources also impact help-seeking as services may or may not be available to survivors. Specifically for rural women, who statistically experience a higher prevalence of IPV, services are difficult to reach with longer travel times and limited resources as organizations in rural areas often serve multiple counties (Peek-Asa et al., 2011). Help-seeking involves a range of choices, responses, and conditions that may encourage or deter survivors from seeking help as these sources of help may or may not be available or address key concerns connected to their experience of IPV.
Sources of help. However, the question remains about the types of people survivors may disclose or seek help from and what these sources of help may or may not offer. As survivors decide to disclose or seek help, they may utilize a variety of sources and the responses of these sources may differ or may meet different needs. Traditionally, the sources of support that survivors seek are often divided between informal and formal sources of help. Informal sources of help consist of individuals from one’s personal social network such as family members, friends, or religious leaders (Nason-Clark, 2009). Formal supports are often individuals from agencies or organizations that provide help or assistance to survivors such as hospitals, health clinics, or shelters (Nason-Clark, 2009; Odero et al., 2014). Disclosure and help-seeking may be motivated by particular needs such as physical injury, financial need, emotional distress, or childcare (Fanslow & Robinson, 2010) and survivors may select the source of help based upon their needs. Indeed, survivor may disclose to a friend for emotional support such as advice, encouragement, or affirmation (Liang et al., 2005), while social service agencies may be the most prevalent source of help for some survivors in need of addressing physical injury or tangible aid. Indeed, survivors may disclose or seek help from either or both informal and formal sources and the responses of these supports may differ based on their resources, training, and the needs of the survivor themselves.

Informal support networks may respond in positive and negative ways such as encouraging the survivor’s safety or diminishing safety by giving the survivor’s location to the abuser (Trotter & Allen, 2009). Because an estimated
75% or more of survivors disclose to informal support networks (e.g., family members, friends, religious leaders and peers; Sylaska & Edwards, 2013), it may be particularly important to understand the informal responses of individuals to IPV. Furthermore, survivors who are a member of a marginalized group (e.g., racial/ethnic minorities) are more likely to exclusively seek help from their support networks and people they know as these sources of help may feel more private and safer (El-Khoury et al., 2004; Sullivan, 2011). Informal responders are likely to be the first people to hear about a survivor’s experience of abuse and a positive or negative response from a survivor’s support network may shape further help-seeking actions in the future.

These informal supports may provide (or deny) tangible aid, such as referrals, housing, or running errands, or they may provide emotional support that can be positive (e.g., listening, validating, and helpful advice on how to get resources) or negative (e.g., blaming the survivor, minimizing the violence, or telling the survivor what should be done; Sylaska & Edwards, 2013; Trotter & Allen, 2009). As noted above, the nature of the response from informal support systems is key as their reactions to the survivor may influence the likelihood of survivors seeking help in the future (Flood & Pease, 2009). Informal networks may be well-situated to respond to IPV, however there are different factors at play in a survivor’s decision to seek help from these supports. For instance, the nature and structure of the support network itself shapes survivor’s help-seeking. In regards to sexual assault, research suggests that survivors may seek help from different personal networks for different resources and may be more likely to seek
help from smaller networks that are not highly interconnected (Dworkin, 2015). Thus, the type of support provided and the nature of the network of the supports are both key factors that may determine if and how survivors disclose or seek help from more informal forms of support.

Survivors may also seek out specific resources from a variety of formal responders (e.g., medical, law enforcement, and legal systems). While individual formal responders may respond in similar ways to informal support networks through either denying the abuse or through providing support and tangible resources, formal responders also are a part of a larger response within an established organization or system. These organizations and systems may be hospitals, law enforcement offices, or housing shelters that have formalized procedures and protocols that guide them in assisting survivors of IPV. These organizations and responders have an opportunity to identify, support, and connect survivors of IPV to resources. Indeed, survivors stated that the most helpful services provided to them were the ones that met pressing needs in the form of tangible resources such as subsidized childcare, housing, food banks, education and job training (Postmus et al., 2009). Formal responders may provide these resources, or because of their role be aware of organizations that they may connect survivors to in order to meet pressing needs.

However, not all experiences of seeking help from these organizations have been positive. Survivors have noted that formal responders may also negatively impact their help-seeking experience through harsh interviewing techniques, disbelieving survivors, or lacking emotional support or concern when
assisting survivors (Goodman & Smyth, 2011). Survivors have expressed how the absence of diversity among service-providers or culturally-sensitive services was disheartening along with the gap between services offered and those that survivors wanted and needed (Laughon, 2007; Sullivan, 2011). Formal responders may be crucial in facilitating service to survivors, but they may also perpetuate harmful personal and system responses through not supporting survivors or not providing relevant resources. However, research also suggests that formal responders have the capacity to be supportive and play a key role in educating both informal supports and organizations about how to best respond to survivors of IPV (Pence & Shephard, 1999). Overall, survivors need a range of services that target a variety of needs and key factors such as attitudes of responders, social settings, and larger community responses may shape survivor’s access and willingness to seek help or use these forms of assistance.

**Culture, Help-seeking, and Disclosure.** Culture, broadly defined as shared attitudes, beliefs, or norms, is important to consider regarding help-seeking and disclosure. For example, there are racial/ethnic differences in disclosure and help-seeking, which may be due to different cultural beliefs (Alhabib, Nur, & Jones, 2010), a lack of sensitivity to cultural beliefs (Liang et al., 2005), or cultural appraisals of who to seek help from (public versus private help-seeking; El-Khoury et al., 2004). Indeed, survivors have noted how their culture may shape who they seek help from if their culture values privacy or not sharing private/personal struggles with others outside of their family or cultural group (Alhabib, Nur, & Jones, 2010; El-Khoury et al., 2004). There are also
racial/ethnic differences in how survivors of IPV seek help or the types of support that they seek. Caucasian women were more likely to use mental health counselors than African American women who were more likely to identify prayer as the main source of help (El-Khoury et al., 2004). Immigrant women who are isolated from family may face barriers to leaving an abusive situation or seeking help due to a lack of social support or an economic dependence on their abusive partner (Liang et al., 2005). These cultural beliefs and cultural locations shape women’s experiences of IPV and their help-seeking and disclosure of their abuse, highlighting the importance of culture in research and understanding about IPV.

Survivors have shared how some supports can be insensitive to their cultural background and concerns, further hindering survivors from discussing the abuse or seeking support (Laughon, 2007; Raj & Silverman, 2002). Additionally, research has noted that both formal and informal forms of assistance are lacking in regards to religious counseling and emphasize the importance of a greater attentiveness to the spiritual needs of survivors (Drumm et al., 2014; El-Khoury et al., 2004; Postmus et al., 2009). The present study explores one particular setting (religious congregations) where cultural beliefs (i.e., in this case considering Protestant Christian religion and religious beliefs as a form of culture) may be part of what guides how religious leaders’ understand or view of their role in responding to IPV. Before discussing religion and religious beliefs in more detail, I first discuss how different supports may respond to IPV in ways that follow best-practices responses to IPV.
**Best-Practice Responses**

Survivors and researchers alike have emphasized the importance of culturally-sensitive responses that are mindful of survivors’ backgrounds, focusing on factors that may encourage or highlight survivor resiliency (Raj & Silverman, 2002). Researchers and survivors have noted how there are particular strategies that may be key in providing relevant, culturally-sensitive responses to IPV (Trotter & Allen, 2009; Wolf, Ly, Hobart, & Kernic, 2003). In particular, these practices may be important for individuals who are first responders (i.e., those that respond to emergency or trauma like IPV such as police officers, medical teams, or crisis advocates). First responders are often formal responders, but they may also be informal responders who receive disclosures or from whom survivors seek help. Whether it is an individual or the organization responding, there are best-practices that these responders are encouraged to employ.

**Individuals.** Best practices for individuals who respond to IPV include a sensitivity to and awareness of IPV along with a knowledge of survivor resources. Indeed, survivors have noted how it was particularly helpful for responders to know about survivors’ rights, to be aware of the services available and how to access the services, and to address the primary concerns of survivors (Goodman, et al., 2009; Wolf et al., 2003). Much of the best-practice responses for individuals include the helpful or “good” responses of informal responders described earlier such as individual responders listening and validating survivors’ experience while also assisting in meeting tangible needs (Sylaska & Edwards, 2013; Trotter & Allen, 2009). While individuals may respond to IPV, these
responders may also be a part of organizations or larger community responses that help to serve as a bridge between the survivor and more formalized resources. Such connections may better equip individuals and organizations to respond to specific needs and concerns of survivors of IPV.

**Organizations.** Best-practice suggestions for organizations responding to IPV include cultivating a responsive organizational culture and the development of protocols for responders (Fanslow & Robinson, 2010). Survivors and researchers alike have noted that a collaborative response that integrates multiple community sectors (i.e., criminal justice systems, human service agencies, advocacy groups, and community groups; Bouffard & Muftić, 2007) that are trained to respond as a collaborative group in a sensitive and integrated fashion may counteract the potentially harmful responses survivors experience when seeking help or deciding to leave an abusive situation (Hess, Allen, & Todd, 2011; Trotter & Allen, 2009). From an empowering institutional advocacy model, a “good response” to survivors of abuse includes being focused on survivor safety, linking the survivor to service providers, offering a supportive, culturally-sensitive community, and maintaining a system of accountability and rehabilitation for abusers (Pence & Shephard, 1999).

**Coordinated community response.** One strategy for achieving this “good response” that is considered a best-practice within the violence against women literature is a coordinated community response through councils or coalitions. This response incorporates a collaborative community response to IPV among formal responders and organizations in the local community. These
councils or coalitions are designed to bring together multiple community sectors involved in responding to IPV (i.e., criminal justice systems, human service agencies, advocacy groups, and community groups; Bouffard & Muftić, 2007) to improve the response of the community to IPV. Coordinating councils may seek to achieve their objectives through information sharing, discussing problems, analyzing the system response, training stakeholders, educating the community, or lobbying stakeholders who are not participating in the council (Allen, Watt, Hess, 2008). These councils are particularly impactful when they include a diverse membership, collaborative relationships among responders, formal procedures, and specialized services that the community needs (Berkowitz, 2001; Nowell & Foster-Fishman, 2011; Nason-Clark, 2009; Sullivan, Bybee, & Allen, 2002). These diverse members may include the presence of law enforcement, advocacy organizations, and even religious leaders, who may provide religiously informed services and counseling; each member of the council may increase the capacity of a coordinated community response through providing specific skills and resources to the council or coalition.

The research on the effectiveness of coordinating councils working against intimate partner violence shows that coordinated responses may reduce recidivism for offenders (Bouffard & Muftić, 2007), increase arrest rates (Salazar, Emshoff, Baker, & Crowley 2007), and facilitate greater collaboration between agencies leading to better services for survivors (Malik, Ward, & Janczewski, 2008). While the research on the success of coordinating councils for IPV varies, some studies suggest that coordinating councils responding to IPV are also related to a
greater knowledge of and connections between responders, institutionalized change, and greater use of the judicial system (Allen, Javdani, Lehrner, & Walden, 2012; Allen et al., 2013; Allen et al., 2008; Javdani & Allen, 2011; Nowell & Foster-Fishman, 2011). Further understanding how individual organizations become a part of or participate in a coordinated, collaborative response may be key in establishing effective and sustainable responses to social issues like IPV. The present study explores how religious leaders understand and respond to IPV and also if religious leaders are connected to organizations in the community or to coordinating councils in order to explore the role of religious leaders in these best-practices responses.

**Religious leaders as part of a coordinated community response.** The presence of religious leaders in these collaborative community responses may also be key and a best-practice as they may provide religiously informed services and counseling, which increase the cultural-sensitivity of a coordinated community response and address the spiritual needs and concerns that survivors may have. Researchers have noted the importance of incorporating informal social networks, such as religious leaders, as members of more formalized responses because these members may be crucial in responding to the social, emotional, and spiritual needs of survivors (Goodman & Smyth, 2011). While formal responders may have training to respond to traumas through their formalized role as a responder, informal responders may respond to violence or trauma within a variety of roles that may not have formalized training or knowledge on how to respond to IPV. By incorporating informal responders into more formalized responses, the
capacity of both informal and formal responders to address IPV may increase. In the context of the present study, fostering these connections may be particularly important as religious leaders on coordinating councils may gain trust in organizations in order to feel comfortable referring survivors from their organization to the organization and organizations may gain a deeper understanding of the religious needs or concerns of survivors of IPV.

However, in the past decade congregations have been criticized for keeping a “holy hush” about partner violence (Kroeger & Nason-Clark, 2010; Skiff, Horwitz, LaRussa-Trott, & Santiago, 2008). Coordinating councils and community groups addressing IPV have noted the difficulty in building a bridge with religious congregations that fosters trust, creates a shared vision, grows collaborative relationships, and ultimately forms a cooperative and comprehensive response to IPV within the community (Nason-Clark, 2000; Putnam, 2001; Skiff, et al., 2008). Furthermore, religious leaders may not feel comfortable referring survivors to other resources where particular religious beliefs (e.g., the sanctity of marriage) may not be considered or understood. Thus, religious leaders may not connect survivors to needed services and may not be connected themselves to a wider community response that may shape their own education about and responses to IPV. Thus, it may be particularly important for congregational leaders to be connected to community agencies, and vice-a-versa, as the two may be able to inform one another about balancing the tensions of religious beliefs and safety concerns in a manner that respects a survivor’s religious perspective while also prioritizing their safety (Nason-Clark, 2009).
Further understanding how religious leaders view their role in responding to IPV and a greater awareness of their knowledge and utilization of community resources may be key in establishing an effective, sustainable, and culturally-relevant response to IPV.

**Responses to Perpetrators**

In the context of the present study, religious leaders may also respond to and interact with perpetrators of IPV. Thus, I will briefly discuss research on perpetration and how responders may interact and respond to perpetrators. Additionally, I will discuss what may be particularly helpful or harmful for survivors who are victim of the perpetrator’s abuse. The first question that often arises when discussing perpetration is why do people perpetrate IPV? Research suggests that some of the vulnerability factors for experiencing IPV may also be related to the vulnerability factors of perpetrating abuse. Impulsivity, issues with alcohol, and childhood exposure to violence are all vulnerability factors to IPV for U.S. couples and researchers associate these factors to aggression and the justification of violence (Kelly & Johnson, 2008; Schafer, Caetano, & Cunradi, 2004). The World Health Organization (2002) reports that for men particularly, younger age, low income, low educational attainment, and previous aggressive behavior are all vulnerability factors for perpetrating IPV. As mentioned earlier, research suggests that a history of violence within the family, whether personal or observed, is also related to perpetration (Jewkes, 2002; WHO, 2002). Other factors that may be linked to perpetration include personality factors such as low self-esteem, depression, and aggression, all of which may be exacerbated by
alcohol abuse (Kelly & Johnson, 2008; Schafer et al., 2004; WHO, 2002). Across the board, research suggests that stressors such as poverty and mental distress are linked to experiencing and perpetrating IPV.

Another question that often arises when discussing perpetration of IPV is about treatment programs. These programs may be mandated or attended voluntarily by perpetrators. Interestingly, different treatments link back to different models of IPV. From the perspective of violence being rooted in power and control, feminist-based group treatment arose to illuminate societal ideologies of male privilege and violence as a tool for men to control women (Pence & Paymar, 1993). The perspective that violence is a learned behavior takes a different approach to treatment utilizing cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT) to learn non-violence through communication, anger, and coping skills (Adams, 1988). While these treatments are not mutually exclusive and have been combined in order to treat perpetrators, the research on their effectiveness is mixed. For example, many note difficulty in treating perpetrators of IPV, especially when anger and other related issues are a potential cause of violence (Eckhardt, Samper, & Murphy, 2008). Linked to the potential determinants and vulnerabilities of IPV, those who have received treatment have a lower recidivism rate when they also address substance abuse and aggression issues (Stover, Meadows, & Kaufman, 2009). While the treatment of perpetrators of IPV is mixed, the research emphasizes the importance of understanding and considering the potential causes of IPV.
These responses and treatments may not just have implications for perpetrators, but also have implications for survivors. Some responses to perpetrators may pose certain risks to survivors or may negatively impact their process or healing. Indeed, responders may risk survivor safety if they share the location of the survivor with the perpetrator or criticize a survivor’s decision to leave and justify the perpetrator’s actions (Trotter & Allen, 2009). By doing so, survivors may feel less inclined to disclose or seek help in the future and may be isolated from other sources of support. Furthermore, individuals may encourage the survivor to grant forgiveness to the abuser too quickly (Wang, Horne, Levitt, & Klesges, 2009), and even offenders have encouraged religious leaders in particular to not forgive offenders so quickly because it allowed offenders to avoid accountability (Fortune, 1995). The perpetrator may avoid responsibility and accountability through encouraging such responses to survivors and perpetuating dynamics of power and control over women (West, 2005). In addition, responders may avoid the abuse, ignore the problem, and invalidate the survivor’s experience (Klevens et al., 2007). These responses to perpetrators have serious implications for survivors and may promote harmful responses to IPV.

Other responders may hold perpetrators accountable and respond in supportive, allied ways to survivors. One qualitative study suggested a “zero-tolerance” response to violence among community members and responders that seeks to do something for survivors such as meeting tangible needs is seen as particularly helpful and supportive to survivors of IPV (Hess et al., 2011). In regards to forgiveness, some responders encourage helpful perspectives of
forgiveness where forgiveness is a process and granted thoughtfully after perpetrators take certain actions such as demonstrating behavior change or acknowledging their wrongdoing (Wade & Worthington, 2005). This process likely incorporates accountability where friends, family, clergy members, or the wider community hold the perpetrator accountable for the offense, which may be particularly helpful for survivors of IPV to feel supported (Hess et al., 2011). Accountability may look different for each situation, including denouncing the abuse, seeking counseling, or addressing root issues such as substance abuse (Hess et al., 2011). The criminal justice system can hold perpetrators accountable through mandatory arrest policies, prosecuting perpetrators, issuing protective orders, and mandatory intervention programs (Buzawa & Buzawa, 2003).

With these positive and negative responses in mind, it is also important to note that individuals and systems may have a mixed response of both helpful and harmful factors. Research suggests that for informal supports, networks, and systems, responses are often multi-dimensional with 78% of survivors noting that support is a mixture of positive and negative responses (Trotter & Allen, 2009). In light of the importance of responding to IPV and the potentially helpful or harmful responses, further research is warranted into the responses of responders to both survivors and perpetrators and what shapes and informs their response.

**Why Focus on Religious Leaders and Their Response?**

In the present study, I focus on the response of religious leaders to IPV and the religious beliefs that contribute to their response. This is an important focus because religious leaders may be first responders or may be seen as more
accessible to their members than other support systems such as religious peers or family members (Skiff et al., 2008). Congregations and their leaders may be key stakeholders in a “good response” through providing support to religious and non-religious IPV survivors as congregations are noted as housing social services and counseling services (Chaves, 2004), creating and mobilizing community resources (Ammerman, 1997; Maton, 2008; Maton, Domingo, & Westin, 2013), and fostering support systems (Putnam, 2001; Wuthnow, 2002). Leaders and their congregations have the unique opportunity to respond to survivors through being an individual and organization that may adopt best-practices or may serve as a bridge to other services and organizations in the community who are assisting survivors of IPV. At the same time, religious leaders and congregations may not live up to these ideals of a good response. Thus, a greater understanding of the responses of religious leaders to IPV may inform and address how psychologists and advocates work with religious leaders to encourage positive and helpful responses to IPV.

Religious leaders are an informal support system, however they also may be key in linking survivors to more formalized services within the broader community. Nason-Clark and Kroeger (2004) note that women are looking for religious leaders to provide practical, emotional, and spiritual help. However, what many women find are a lack of awareness about IPV among congregational leadership, modest knowledge of resources available, and a lack of ability or comfort in offering religious help of some kind (Nason-Clark, 2009). While responses may differ, Al Miles (2000), a reverend himself, suggests that the most
frequent response of clergy members is for the marriage to be saved at all cost and for the wife to “forgive and forget.” This may be because religious leaders face significant pressure to maintain and keep the family intact, thus not considering divorce as a viable option (Nason-Clark, 2009). Ware, Levitt, & Bayer (2004) studied religious leaders’ perceptions of IPV, finding that leaders thought IPV was rare and that giving survivors an available, educative, and forgiving space was enough to buffer the effects of IPV (Ware et al., 2004). Ware et al. (2004) also found these leaders experienced a tension between their views of marriage as sacred and their safety concerns for the survivor. This tension may be reflected in survivor’s experiences of being offered counseling to reconcile with the abusive partner immediately after disclosing their abuse as many religious leaders view divorce as a “last resort” (Levitt & Ware, 2006). It seems that religious leaders face a tension between their beliefs and their response within their role as religious leaders.

In order to improve religious leaders’ knowledge and response, religious institutions have been encouraged to provide trainings for religious leaders and for an overall anti-patriarchal stance within religious organizations (Knickmeyer, Levitt, & Horne, 2010). Unfortunately, many leaders note that they have not received training in their education to become a religious leader on how to respond to IPV and thus may be uninformed about how to help survivors of IPV once they are leading a congregation (Ware et al., 2004). Indeed, survivors of IPV have noted that they have often had to leave their congregation, a previous support system, when they choose to separate from an abusive spouse because of
religious beliefs that seemingly conflict with the decision to leave an abusive situation (i.e., how the congregation views divorce and marriage; Knickmeyer, Levitt, Horne, & Bayer, 2003). Given the importance of support systems and the potential role of congregations in the community, such trainings may be key to facilitate supportive and positive responses of religious leaders to survivors.

Research has shown that trainings may improve the response of religious leaders to survivors who seek help from religious congregations (Skiff et al., 2008). Not only did religious leaders feel more equipped with a greater understanding and knowledge about IPV, but religious leaders were also able to link survivors to greater resources (Skiff et al., 2008). Such trainings may increase the likelihood of religious leaders being able to connect survivors to community resources or other formalized assistance. Religious leaders who were not informed about IPV and who advise survivors may actually give advice that is harmful for the survivor (e.g., encourages her to stay in an abusive relationship or advises her to forgive and forget the abuse quickly). Congregations, and those who are involved in them (e.g., religious leaders and members) have an opportunity to respond to IPV in supportive ways, however it is still unclear as to how they are helping survivors both within their walls and in the wider community. One goal of the current study is to better understand the perspective of religious leaders in order to inform the creation of relevant and effective trainings and resources to help leaders better respond to IPV.

**Understanding the Context of Christianity and Diversity Within Christianity**
The present study is focused on Christian religious leaders and the potential for such leaders to be part of the solution to IPV. However, it is important to briefly describe the context of Christianity within the U.S. to understand diversity within this broad religious category. To do so, I first acknowledge the critique that Christianity in and of itself has historically been linked to the legitimization of violence (Steffen, 2012). I then describe how sociologists have classified certain Christian denominations into broad religious traditions of Evangelical Protestant, Mainline Protestant, and Black Protestant. Although further diversity exists within Christianity (there also are branches of Christianity such as Catholicism or Orthodox faiths, Steffen, 2012), this discussion is limited to diversity within Protestantism since this is the focus of the current study. Finally, I discuss the interesting intersection of race and religious tradition within Black Protestant denominations. Overall, the point of this description is not to set-up a comparison among religious traditions, but instead to recognize that religious beliefs may be similar or different across traditions and there may be different experiences in responding to IPV based on one’s religious context. Of course there is further diversity within religious traditions, and any broad differentiation among religious traditions should not obscure within-tradition variability. Thus, this description is offered more as a heuristic to lay a foundation for examining diverse religious beliefs across the broad spectrum of Protestant Christianity.

Christianity and historical links to violence. Although a full review is beyond the scope of this dissertation, it does bear mentioning that Christianity
itself has been critiqued as legitimating violence (Kimball, 2012; Steffen, 2012; Thomas, 1998; West, 1999). Indeed, much ink has been spilled in various fields discussing the ways that religion in general, and Christianity in particular, has supported violence. For example, Steffen (2013) noted the justification of war for the sake of spreading Christianity, violence used in converting people from other religious beliefs, and the use of force to handle conflicts internal to Christianity. To illustrate, consider the Crusades, where the Christian church sanctioned war in order to respond to external threats to their religious faith (Kimball, 2012; Steffen, 2012). Clearly, there are many ways that Christianity has been active, or at least complicit, in justifying the use of violence.

At the same, within Christianity there are diverging beliefs about the justification and use of violence. For instance, some view Jesus as a pacifist, calling followers to reconciliation, forgiveness, and love to enemies versus others who believe that there are circumstances, such as to punish wrongdoing or restoring what was taken away from the people, where war and violence are legitimate tools to obtain justice (Kimball, 2012; Steffen, 2012). Differences on the use of violence have shaped different positions within the Christian Church, specifically peace churches within Protestant Christianity such as Quaker congregations. And in more recent years, the work of individuals like Martin Luther King Jr. and other Christians have encouraged a view of Christianity responding to acts of violence and injustice to advocate for equal rights, justice, and social change (Kimball, 2012; Steffen, 2012). These views inform theologies
of the use of violence and demonstrate Christianity’s sordid history with violence and violent actions.

**Christian religious traditions within Protestantism.** In this study I interview religious leaders from Protestant religious congregations. Most religious congregations are part of larger national organizations called religious denominations (e.g., Chaves, 2004; Southern Baptist, United Methodist, American Baptist, etc.). There is a long (and interesting) history as to how Protestant denominations have come to exist in their present form. One can trace them back to the beginning of Protestantism in the early 1500’s when Martin Luther rebelled against the Catholic church in allegedly nailing his 95 theses, a provocative document that listed questions and propositions for debate regarding pressing religious concerns specifically about salvation and indulgences (i.e., money given to the church to secure salvation), to the Catholic church wall (Bainton, 2013). Since that time, numerous splits have occurred within Protestantism resulting in broad religious families such as Lutherans, Presbyterians, Mennonites, and Anglicans (among many others, see thearda.com for a list of family trees).

Within these groups there have been further splits and schisms. Sutton and Chaves (2004) detail patterns in splits and schisms from 1890-1990, showing that splits occur over disagreements and organizational processes, not just around theology differences. Within denominations themselves, splits may occur as a group of members act upon a division within the denomination in order to come together, gather resources, and organize other members to develop a new
national-level denomination (Sutton & Chaves, 2004). Stated differently, Chaves (1993) describes how splits occur as intradenominational power shifts horizontally, where a new grouping is formed that stands alongside, yet differs from the original denomination and competes for resources and support. For instance, Evangelical Protestant congregations possess a variation of beliefs that differ on their emphasis on pietism or adherence to specific religious doctrines that originate from a fundamentalist/modernist split after World War I (Woodbury & Smith, 1998). Fundamentalists emphasize separation from the world and modern thought and strict adherence to the biblical teachings, while another group, commonly known as Evangelicals, disagree with such separation and formed an Evangelical movement to embrace a more open, modern belief system and doctrine (Woodbury & Smith, 1998). Thus, religious traditions have changed and shaped over time as a result of conflict as denominations change, shift, or redevelop.

As a result of these shifts and changes, many denominations have been born out of conflict, both organizational and religious in nature, and have worked to form new denominations that likely shaped the culture and attitudes of those within the setting (Steensland et al., 2000). This cursory review of denominations quickly shows vast diversity among denominations. However, sociologists of religion have proposed broad methods to classify and organize denominations into broad Protestant religious traditions (Steensland et al., 2000). For example, Steensland and colleagues (2000) classified religious denominations based on their historical roots as well as taking into consideration broad religious beliefs
and traditions. They proposed three religious traditions of Evangelical Protestant, Mainline Protestant, and Black Protestant categorized by their history, structure, and beliefs.

These traditions within Protestantism differ in a variety of ways, such as on the role and place of religion in public and private sectors (Chaves, 2004). For instance, Evangelical Protestant congregations are often more separated from culture as they tend to focus on individual piety, salvation, and other-worldly pursuits (Pargament & Maton, 2000; Steensland et al., 2000), while Mainline Protestant congregations tend to be proactive on social and economic justice, embracing modernity and an openness to varied individual beliefs (Steensland et al, 2000). This difference is often categorized along liberal-conservative lines between Mainline and Evangelical Protestant congregations as this distinction captures the different views of the Bible, cultural and social change, and community engagement between these traditions (Chaves, 2011). For instance, conservative, Evangelical Protestant congregations tend to interpret the Bible literally, while liberal, Mainline Protestant congregations interpret scriptures within the historical and social context of the times it was written (Chaves, 2011). These interpretations of the Bible shape religious beliefs of the congregation, such as beliefs about the environment, gender roles, and marriage (Colaner & Giles, 2007; Guth, Green, Kellstedt, & Smidt, 1995; Steensland et al., 2000).

Interestingly, Black Protestant congregations are often distinguished apart from these stark lines of liberal-conservative as Black Protestant traditions are often less centralized on distinguishing liberal-conservative beliefs and more
centralized around race as critical to the historical tradition and beliefs of the congregation to work against discrimination and oppression (Steensland et al., 2000), which will be discussed in further depth in the next subsection.

These differences have not only shaped the beliefs on the role of congregations, but also the activities of Evangelical Protestant, Mainline Protestant, and Black Protestant congregations. Evangelical Protestant congregations are less likely to house social services within their congregation, but often partner with other religiously-based organizations to support and serve alongside them (Ammerman, 2005; Polson, 2014). However, Black Protestant congregations, along with Mainline Protestants, tend to partner more with government or secular organizations, perhaps related to the previously discussed religious orientation and priorities of these congregations to incorporate diverse perspectives (Ammerman, 2005; Chaves, 2004). Mainline Protestant congregations have historically been more involved in the wider community, advocating for causes that are justice- or feminist-oriented such as working against discrimination (Chaves, 2004, 2011; Steensland et al., 2000; Stewart-Thomas, 2009). Black Protestants also have a history of political activism and being tied to the community through social service and political activities, which may be a result of their experiences of oppression and discrimination (Brown, 2006).

Indeed, Moore (1992) notes that the Black Protestant church’s involvement in the Civil Rights Movement through supplying resources to offering a safe place to communicate and organize strong leaders cultivated civic
engagement and social justice roots that have grown within the African American church over time (Brown, 2006; Brown & Brown, 2003). Today, African American congregations are noted for their organizational characteristics such as strong support for outreach, activities focused on social change, and political involvement in their communities (Brown & Brown, 2003; Martin et al., 2011; Moore, 1992). Thus, these denominations within Protestantism differ in the ways they partner with other organizations and the issues they focus on as a religious community. Given the importance of the history, beliefs, and activities of these traditions, the present study explores religious leader’s understanding and response to IPV with an understanding of the historical context and theological belief out of which these traditions have been born.

**Black Protestantism: Standing at the nexus of religion and race.** As noted above, Black Protestantism has been determined based on a denomination’s membership in a historically Black denomination, in addition to religious beliefs and history of the congregation. This creates an interesting intersection of race and religion where, within Black Protestantism, religious tradition is intimately interwoven with race and the racial history of African Americans in the United States. As noted above, it is thus unsurprising that Black Protestant denominations were active in the racial Civil Rights Movement and continue to be fixtures within the African American community as race, history, and religion have all intersected within the church.

Though congregations have played a role in dismantling oppression, congregations also have the ability to be disempowering settings that cultivate
disempowering messages within the community or that target specific groups within the congregation, such as women (Johnson, 2002). Indeed, the intersection of gender, race, and religion is particularly relevant to the stories of Black women, especially in regard to their experiences with religion and IPV. In particular, Womanist theology critically reflects upon Black women’s daily life and how oppression is interwoven with both their involvement in congregations and with their experiences of the world around them (Thomas, 1998). From this theological perspective, the whole (e.g., racial, physical, emotional, political, social, religious) lives and experiences of Black women should be understood and acknowledged within religious congregations. It is thus important in the current study to attend not only to the religious dynamics surrounding IPV, but also the racial dynamics, especially for Black women. Although not an exhaustive review of the intersection of race and IPV for Black women, it is important to acknowledge that experiences of violence for religious women of color are uniquely distinct due to the racial/ethnic implications in experiences of violence and oppression. Indeed, Womanist theology opens the door for Black women to own their roots in religion, culture, and Black history through honoring Black women’s historical struggles and strengths, critiquing manifestations of Black women’s oppression, and constructing ethics and theology centered on Black women’s experiences (Phillips, 2006; Sanders, 1989). Womanist theology further highlights Black Protestantism at the nexus of race and religion as it emphasizes practices and actions of the church that move toward honoring Black women’s
experiences of oppression, celebrating Black women’s assertiveness, and encouraging Black women’s liberation (Sanders, 1989; Thomas, 1998).

Counter to popular notions of a color-blind and post-racial society, it is important to acknowledge the ways that race continues to matter and may intersect with religion and IPV. Although color-blind statements about “not seeing race” appear to support equality, they also perpetuate a belief that race does not matter and devalues Black identities or identities of color (West, 2006). A cultural silencing of Black voices has been noted throughout research as Black voices, specifically those of Black women and racial/ethnic concerns, are seen as less valid and less worthy of being addressed (Thomas, 1998; West, 1999; 2006). Within the context of violence, West (1999) describes experiences of Black women’s credibility being questioned when disclosing violence and how women’s level of protection in prisons is determined by race. The denial of racial/ethnic differences may encourage the questioning of the credibility of Black voices as such a denial fails to acknowledge the systems of oppression and experiences of racial/ethnic prejudices historically and presently faced specifically by Black women.

The silencing of Black women is further compounded by the stereotype of Black women being easily angered or overreacting to circumstances. Indeed, Black women have expressed a difficulty in speaking out about their experiences of violence and oppression as it goes against the compliant “proper negro” behavior that has been created and perpetuated by White critics and society as a whole (West, 1999). In her book, West (1999) describes how Black women have
downplayed their experience or not expressed their anger in order to avoid being labeled as an “angry Black woman” or for fear that their voice may be discredited. Research has shown that these actions of Black women downplaying their experiences of violence are often misunderstood by uniformed responders and family members who may view these actions as inappropriate responses or signs that a survivor is lying (West, 1999; 2006). Such racial/ethnic prejudices or systems of oppression that are disadvantageous to women of color may create different barriers to disclosure, help-seeking, or service delivery for Black women.

West (1999) notes that for African American women who have experienced suffering due to oppression and marginalization, they may experience and understand violence differently from those who are not marginalized. African American survivors may not view the trial as a betrayal by God because of their previous experiences with hardships and oppression. West (1999) notes how Black women’s experience with oppression often forms a theology where suffering is a part of life and not a direct consequence of individual sin. Rather, suffering exists in a broken world and faith is a primary sustaining resource in light of the multiplicative forms of oppression and violence experienced by Black women. Thus, Black survivors’ understanding of IPV may be different due to their views of suffering or may be exacerbated by additional forms of oppression and marginalization that further encourage the silencing of Black women’s voices. Although not a central focus in the current study, this reflection on the nexus of race and religion is offered to note the importance of listening closely for similarities and differences in the experiences of religious leaders serving
communities of color and to take seriously a Womanist perspective in providing space and credibility to the experiences and voices of Black women who have experienced violence.

**Religious Beliefs and Responses to Violence**

It is important to not only understand the general landscape of religious traditions, but also to understand how religious beliefs inform responses to violence that may be helpful or harmful. Particular religious beliefs may be used to justify or to denounce violence. Specifically, religious beliefs about discipline, gender roles, marriage, suffering, and forgiveness have all been associated with responses that can be violent or that may justify and condone abuse. These beliefs are each explored in greater depth within this section to provide an understanding of ways that religious beliefs have justified, or at times critiqued, violence and abuse.

Indeed, past research highlights how Christian religious scriptures may justify violence, specifically in regards to childrearing practices. Such phrases as “Whoever spares the rod hates their children, but the one who loves their children is careful to discipline them” (Proverbs 13:24, NIV) have been associated with the expression “spare the rod, spoil the child,” often used to justify family violence, specifically the physical punishment of children (Carey, 1994). This justification of violence towards children as a strategy for discipline is associated with numerous negative outcomes for children. Physical punishment has been associated with teenage delinquency and violence (Carey, 1994), as well as higher risk for depression, suicidal ideation, alcohol abuse, child abuse and physical
violence on wives (Straus & Kantor, 1994). Such religious beliefs may not only justify abuse, but perpetuate family violence as normative. While these beliefs may not always be used to justify child abuse, they have been interpreted in harmful ways that justify violence or perpetuate abuse through family violence.

Other religious beliefs may inform particular gender role ideologies, the attitudes and ideals about the roles of men and women both in the family and in society as a whole. Gender role ideologies may be informed by different religious texts and beliefs about gender roles and marriage and may shape religious leader’s understanding of IPV or of power in relationships. Past literature suggests traditional gender roles are associated with a greater acceptance of violence against women and more negative attitudes towards survivors of sexual violence, in particular IPV (Flood & Pease, 2009; Nagel, Matsuo, McIntyre, & Morrison, 2005; Nayak et al., 2003). These negative attitude may be informed by how these roles are drawn from specific beliefs and views about the responsibilities and power of each partner that give greater control to men (Colaner & Giles, 2007). The roots of these ideologies may be based in tradition and certain religious texts and scriptures that religious leaders may adhere to, preach, and enact.

For instance, a traditional view of gender roles often associated with religious conservatism suggests that in a marriage, the man has headship, leadership, and authority over the woman, who is called to submit to his authority (i.e., complementarianism; Colaner & Giles, 2007). From this perspective, women are seen as weaker than men and are to be a “help-meet” to a man (“The Lord God said, ‘It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper
suitable for him,'” Genesis 2:18, NIV; Colaner & Giles, 2007). Religious ideologies of gender roles within marriage where men are dominant and women are submissive may be used as justification for a husband to abuse his wife in order to fulfill his dominant role and encourage her submission and obedience (i.e., more traditional gender roles; Bentley, 1995; Flood & Pease, 2009). Alternatively, from a more liberal perspective, the scripture, “There is neither male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (Galatians 3:28; NIV) is often interpreted as God supporting the equality of the sexes in the roles that they may take at home, in the church, and in a career (i.e., egalitarianism; Colaner & Giles, 2007). Such beliefs may shape how religious leaders and survivors understand and respond to violence within the relationship and a survivor’s decision to leave an abusive situation.

Religious views of marriage may also be related to IPV and may shape how religious leaders assist survivors of IPV. Some religious women note that they blame themselves for the abuse, labeling it as failing both God and their family because they could not “make it work” or “fix it” to keep the marriage together (Popescu et al., 2009). Indeed, Nason-Clark (2004) states the stakes are higher for religious women who experience IPV to keep the marriage together, demonstrating the importance of considering beliefs and the social pressure exerted by one’s religious community that may shape a survivor’s decision to stay in an abusive situation.

Individual religious traditions within Christianity have also ascribed different importance on marriage (e.g., Catholic congregations taking a
sacramental view and Reformed congregations holding marriage as a contract; Witte, 2012). These differing views on the importance or role of marriage may shape different understandings of marriage and different views, not only of the purpose of marriage, but also the conditions for divorce. For religious leaders and survivors, religious beliefs about marriage may create a tension to keep the façade of a happy, intact, Christian family and thus, the marriage is seen as something sacred and to be protected (Nash & Hesterberg, 2009; Nason-Clark, 2000; Pargament & Mahoney, 2005; Popescu et al., 2009). This tension is demonstrated in survivor’s experiences in seeking help from religious leaders as many survivors noted they were first offered counseling to reconcile with the abusive partner before separation was considered because the religious leader often viewed divorce as a “last resort” (Levitt & Ware, 2006). Divorce is not seen as a viable option within some religious traditions, as it is only sanctioned in the case of adultery, and thus IPV is not grounds for divorce (Popescu et al., 2009). These religious beliefs about marriage and divorce held by both survivors and perpetrators have been used to justify abuse within the marriage and used as another tool by which the perpetrator abuses the survivor (Nason-Clark, 2004). Additionally, these religious beliefs may also encourage women or others to keep the abuse silent and encourage survivors, religious leaders, and perpetrators to not acknowledge the abuse (e.g., abuse does not happen within the church; Nason-Clark, 2009; Popescu et al., 2009). Thus, religious views of marriage, and how these views related to divorce, may have crucial implications for religious survivors of IPV.
Furthermore, messages of marriage and relationships may be further complicated by another religious belief related to IPV, a religious belief about suffering. In particular, messages such as “my cross to bear,” “turn the other cheek,” and “following Jesus to the cross” may all be religious beliefs related to suffering that when spoken in light of IPV, may encourage survivors to continue to return to dangerous relationships (Bentley, 1995). Religious beliefs about suffering may encourage quiet suffering or passive acceptance of suffering as ideals for a “good” Christian (Bowland, 2011) and warrant further exploration. Additionally, survivors and religious leaders may use religious beliefs about suffering such as “my cross to bear” in an attempt to make sense of the abuse or to justify the abuse.

Indeed, research exploring experiences of IPV among religious women and their religious beliefs about suffering suggests that women may create a “fit” between their abuse and religious oriented-schemas in order to create meaning or purpose behind their abuse (Nash & Hesterberg, 2009). Some women seek to align their abuse with various narratives in the Bible in a manner that gives their abuse religious significance as this trial is viewed as her chance to demonstrate her faith in God (Burnett, 1996). For instance, one survivor related her experiences of abuse to the biblical story of Job and his suffering (Nash & Hesterberg, 2009). To this survivor, the narrative of the story was God testing Job’s loyalty through a variety of sufferings wagered between God and Satan. From her view of the story, once Job remained faithful through waiting, God intervened and restored all that was lost in his suffering. This narrative provided
meaning to the survivor’s experience as she modeled her response to the abuse experienced by Job, turning to prayer and emphasizing patience and waiting for deliverance. After she had left the abusive relationship, this survivor noted that just like Job, she waited and that because of that waiting God was slowly restoring what was lost. Each story contained an underlying theme of how being a good wife, enduring the abuse, and praying or being patient would change their husband or their situation (Nash & Hesterberg 2009). Each woman believed that her suffering was going to produce some change as she demonstrated patience and waited for God to intervene or instigate change. For these women, their religious beliefs about suffering shaped how they processed, responded, and sought help, if at all, for their abuse.

Another religious belief that may be relevant to IPV is forgiveness. There are multiple religious perspectives on forgiveness, some of which suggest that forgiveness incorporates reconciliation, while others hold that forgiveness in the context of ending the relationship is acceptable (Wade & Worthington, 2005). Forgiveness has the capacity to be a positive religious or secular coping strategy through which individuals seek help in reducing feelings of bitterness, hurt, and fear due to an offense (Pargament, Smith, Koenig, & Perez, 1998; Wade & Worthington, 2005). However, for many religious survivors of IPV the question of forgiveness arises from the tension between religious teachings on forgiveness and their own experiences of abuse from an intimate partner (Nash & Hesterberg, 2009). Forgiveness is a complex religious belief that may help or hinder survivor’s seeking safety or healing from IPV.
Simplistic understandings of forgiveness may encourage survivors to stay in abusive situations, condone harmful behavior, or overlook painful experiences (Wade & Worthington, 2005). In addition, research on forgiveness and religion suggests moral or religious ties to forgiveness may induce shame and guilt as survivors feel they should forgive and something is wrong with them if they cannot (Wade & Worthington, 2005). For instance, Christian women may have encountered religious phrases that encourage them to forgive quickly such as “sacrifice and forgive” and “forgive seven times seventy” which discourage taking time to contemplate the dynamics of forgiveness (Miles, 2000; Popescu et al., 2009; Wang et al., 2009). Simplistic and quick forgiveness may discourage survivors from seeking help or encourage forgiveness too quickly in ways that may risk survivor safety.

Alternatively, some views of forgiveness may also encourage forgiveness and accountability, where the perpetrator is held accountable for the offense either by friends and family of the survivor or by the wider community (Hess et al., 2011; Wade & Worthington, 2005). One religious view suggests that the steps of forgiveness are: to define forgiveness, remember the hurt, grow empathy for the offender, acknowledge their own past offenses and encouraging a commitment to forgive the perpetrator (Wade & Worthington, 2005). Helpful views of forgiveness emphasize how forgiveness is a process and provide space for survivors to work through these religious conflicts as they feel comfortable and safe over time (Nason-Clark, 2009; Wade & Worthington, 2005). These
perspectives on forgiveness hold potential to be healing for survivors and establish processes of accountability for perpetrators.

Being that there are multiple perspectives of forgiveness, marriage, and other sacred constructs, it may be some religious beliefs are too simple for the complexity of IPV, while others may acknowledge the complexity and process for survivors of IPV. While some Christian teachings may encourage justice and respect for persons, others when taken to the extreme may actually perpetuate violence. A religious leader may hold particular religious beliefs about forgiveness that may shape how they counsel a survivor of IPV and may shape how the congregation and its members understand forgiveness in the context of violence. An emphasis on forgiveness and sacrifice within religious settings may make it more difficult for religious women to acknowledge their abuse or seek help (Bentley, 1995; Popescu et al., 2009). Indeed, such beliefs may also shape how religious leaders and support systems in the community, specifically in religious congregations, interpret and respond to violence against women both personally and in a larger community context.

Religion and Experiences of IPV

**Religious leaders as responders.** Religious leaders who assist survivors may hold particular religious views, which shape how religious leaders process a survivor’s experience of IPV personally and with the survivor. Indeed, religious leaders can respond in a variety of ways and their responses have implications for survivor’s future help-seeking and religious participation (Knickmeyer et al., 2003). As summarized earlier in this document, religious leaders as informal
responders may respond in positive ways in line with best-practices by bringing the abuse to light through telling the offender that abuse is “not okay,” providing unconditional support to the survivor, and through speaking out against violence in front of their congregation (Alhabib, Nur, Jones, 2010; Hess et al., 2011; Nason-Clark & Kroeger, 2004). Religious leaders may also incorporate religious counseling or supports that other responders may or may not be able to offer. Alternatively, religious leaders and other informal supports may disbelieve survivors, deny the existence of abuse within their community (e.g., their faith community), or may normalize harshness or violence as a necessary part of a relationship (Hess et al., 2011; Nason-Clark, 1996). Popescu et al. (2009) note that the impact of IPV on religious women may be exacerbated by these religious beliefs that deny or distort the idea of partner abuse (e.g., abuse does not happen within this congregation). The present study seeks to understand how religious leaders respond to IPV and the religious beliefs that shape their response in order to better learn about how religious leaders help survivors, the unique religious needs that religious leaders may encounter, and what resources exist in their community in order to assist in facilitating an understanding among various community responders.

While some leaders may desire to bring the abuse to light or encourage a survivor to leave an abusive situation, religious leaders may also face a tension between their personal and congregational religious beliefs and how to help survivors of IPV (Nason-Clark 1999; Ware et al., 2004). This tension may be because religious leaders are embedded in a larger structure of religious tradition
and these traditions may have particular values surrounding issues related to IPV. Religious leaders may view their role as a religious leader to uphold these values even if they contradict his/her personal beliefs. Indeed, religious leaders may value survivor’s safety, but may also be in a context (i.e., congregation) that holds particular religious traditions that value keeping the family intact or discourages divorce (Nason-Clark, 2009). Religious leaders may face a tension in how to respond to and assist survivors of IPV given their leadership role within such contexts. Some religious leaders may feel that they are functioning in a role and thus, choose to follow the religious traditions of the congregation, while others may choose to first prioritize the survivor’s safety and view violence as a violation of marriage (Knickmeyer et al., 2010). Informed religious leaders may be important to religious survivors as they may serve as a unique resource by providing religiously informed counseling. Additionally, religious leaders may also play a part in fostering a supportive religious community through awareness and resources within the congregation that hold potential to increase the overall capacity of a larger coordinated community response.

**Survivors’ experiences and religious help-seeking.** Religious beliefs and the responses of religious community may be a barrier to help-seeking and disclosure for survivors of IPV. For Christian women in particular, there is a great concern about how their religious leaders and peers will respond and support them after they disclose abuse (Wang et al., 2009). The fear of a negative reaction from support systems like those in their family or the congregation may deter survivors from seeking the help they need and from accessing key resources.
that these supports may have or connect them to. The perspectives of religious individuals and the responses of leaders within congregations may be crucial to survivors who are deciding to leave an abusive situation and a deeper understanding of the nature and form of these responses is warranted. Additionally, given research about survivors experiences with religious leaders who lack an awareness of IPV and knowledge of appropriate resources coupled with the importance of religious counseling and support for survivors (Drumm et al., 2014; El-Khoury et al., 2004; Nason-Clark, 2009; Postmus et al., 2009), the present study may inform trainings and support for religious leaders to be better equipped to respond to IPV.

Summary. The literature presented about religious responses to IPV suggests there is a broad range of responses from helpful to potentially harmful. This research begs the question of how leaders are responding to survivors of IPV and what religious beliefs shape their response. Furthermore, a religious survivor may also need assistance in navigating their religious faith and their decision to leave an abusive situation, where religious leaders may be “first responders” and survivors may disclose to their social supports, sometimes those within the congregation itself. Being that individuals within congregations share a setting that teaches and reinforces various skills, beliefs, and social processes, there may be particular patterns of responding to situations like IPV within the congregation that are shaped by leaders and the religious beliefs that are emphasized within their congregation. Also, the response of religious communities to survivors of IPV may influence survivors’ decisions to stay or leave abusive situations. Given
that research recommends organizations take part in a coordinated community response, have a protocol on how to respond to IPV, and link survivors to a wide berth of services, it may also be important to understand how religious leaders understand and respond to IPV and how, if at all, congregations are responding through services and community responses. A greater understanding of how congregations, specifically leaders, understand and respond to IPV and are a part of a larger community response may have great implications of survivors' experience of help-seeking and their evaluation of the abusive relationship.

**Rationale**

As described throughout the introduction, survivors face a variety of obstacles, concerns, and challenges. Experiences of IPV have been associated with an increase of chronic mental health illness, depressive symptoms, substance abuse, and injury (Coker et al., 2002). Furthermore, survivors may face economic, political, social, and religious factors that impact their ability or willingness to seek help. Survivors of IPV face a variety of challenges and may benefit from the assistance of individuals, organizations, and communities to remove or minimize these barriers. The present study examines the potential of religious leaders and their congregations to minimize or exacerbate these barriers through how they understand and respond to IPV. The purpose of the study is to explore how religious leaders understand and view their role in responding to IPV, what religious beliefs shape such efforts, and to explore if and how the religious community responds or is part of a community response.
Research literature suggests religious leaders and religious peers are important responders to IPV survivors and their responses to IPV may be shaped by religious beliefs. However, religious survivors of IPV noted they often find that their religious leader has modest knowledge of resources and a lack of awareness or a discomfort to offer help of a religious nature (Nason-Clark, 2009). Such an awareness and knowledge to respond to IPV is important given the helpful and harmful ways religious leaders may respond to IPV. It may be that some religious beliefs may encourage survivors of IPV to stay in an abusive situation (e.g., prioritizing the marriage over immediate personal safety) or these beliefs may discourage congregations from addressing or discussing IPV, creating a culture of silence on the topic (i.e., a “holy hush”). Alternatively, some religious leaders and congregations may facilitate support for survivors of IPV (e.g., tangible resources, emotional support, connections to resources), and may be motivated to do so because of religious beliefs of compassion or those that denounce violence between intimate partners as a human rights violation. Thus, it is important to explore whether religious leaders and congregations are assisting survivors of IPV and what aspects of the context shape that response. Thus, exploring how religious leaders understand and view their role in responding to instances of IPV and how various religious beliefs may shape a response may help us better understand how to train and equip religious leaders and congregations to understand, respond, and assist survivors of IPV.

As discussed earlier in this document, focusing on Black Protestant, Evangelical Protestant, and Mainline Protestant allowed me to examine diversity
within Protestantism regarding religious beliefs and practices that may relate to IPV. Although important, Catholic traditions have unique histories that are intertwined with social activism and other factors (e.g., hierarchical structure of the Catholic church, persecution of Catholics in the U.S.), which may have introduced a level of complexity that was beyond the scope of the current study. Thus, in this study we focused on Black Protestant, Evangelical Protestant, and Mainline Protestant religious leaders.

**Research Questions**

**Primary Research Question:** How does intimate partner violence (IPV) intersect with the experiences of Mainline Protestant, Black Protestant, and Evangelical Protestant Christian religious leaders?

a. How do religious leaders understand and view their role in responding to IPV?

b. How, if at all, do religious leaders attempt to assist survivors of IPV?

c. How, if at all, do religious beliefs, ideologies, and stories come up for religious leaders in their response to IPV?

d. What do religious leaders need to better respond to IPV?

**Secondary Research Question:** How, if at all, are congregations involved in programs or a larger community response (e.g., participating in coalitions) related to IPV? (i.e., organizations beyond their walls)

**Method**

**Participants**
In this study I recruited 20 religious leaders (e.g., pastors, ministers, clergy, elders, directors of ministries) of Christian congregations that were from denominations classified by Steensland and colleagues (2000) as Black Protestant \((n = 2)\), Evangelical Protestant \((n = 6)\), and Mainline Protestant \((n = 12)\). Participant demographics were collected through free responses questions and are summarized below. Participants were on average 53.35 years old \((SD = 9.86, Range\ 37-70)\), 8 identified as women \((40\%)\) and 12 identified as men \((60\%)\). Twelve identified as White or Caucasian \((60\%)\), 5 as European American \((e.g., German, Welsh, Irish, English, Norwegian; 25\%)\), 2 as African American \((10\%)\), and 1 as Biracial \((5\%)\). Participants were all religious leaders in Protestant congregations in a variety of roles: 8 identified as head pastors \((40\%)\), 9 as other types of pastors \((e.g., associate or assistant pastors, teaching pastor, family pastors; 45\%)\), and 3 as leadership roles in the congregation besides pastors \((i.e., director of children’s ministry, director of care services, elder, deacon; 15\%)\). On average, these leaders had been religious leaders in their congregations for 10.03 years \((SD = 6.65, Range\ 6\ months\ to\ 20\ years)\). Participant demographics are summarized in Table 1.
Participants were leaders in congregations that varied along a number of key demographics. Free responses questions about the congregation were used to better understand the demographics of their congregation. I used participant responses and language to create descriptive labels to summarize the congregational demographics. Congregations were founded from as early as 1831 to as recent as 1985. Religious leaders who participated in the present study led congregations with an average size of 449.5 attenders ($SD = 716.59$, $Range = 40$)
to 2,300, Median = 125). Of these congregations, leaders identified their congregations as theologically progressive/liberal (40%), middle of the road (15%), conservative (30%), and as a mix of conservative and liberal (15%).

Politically, religious leaders identified their congregations as liberal/progressive/democratic (50%), moderate to conservative (15%), conservative (10%), and as a mix of political leanings (25%). The racial/ethnic compositions of congregations were also described by leaders as predominately White (70%), predominately Black (10%), or as multicultural with a diverse congregational membership (20%). Many of these congregations were located in high-income or up and coming neighborhoods (45%) versus middle class (15%), low income (10%), or mixed-income neighborhoods (30%). The socioeconomic makeup of the congregation itself however was more varied: high-income (10%), middle class (30%), low income (10%), or mixed-income neighborhoods (50%)

**Measurement and Procedures**

Interviews were conducted following the interview protocol found in Appendix B. The interview questions were developed to explore the various ways religious leaders understood and responded to survivors of IPV and the religious beliefs that may contribute to their response.

The interview protocol began with demographic questions about the participant and the congregation and then transitioned to general questions about religious leader’s understanding, response, and religious beliefs related to IPV. Relevant questions about how religious leaders understood IPV included “As a religious leader, how do you understand IPV?” “How would you define IPV?” “What
causes IPV?” To gain an understanding of how religious leaders have responded to IPV, questions included “How, if at all, does IPV come up in your role as a religious leader?” “Can you tell me an example or two about a time when IPV came up in your role as the leader?” Furthermore, the interview protocol contained questions on how religious leader’s beliefs may inform their response (e.g., “In your role as a religious leader, how, if at all, do your religion or religious beliefs inform your response to IPV?”). Follow-up probes about their religious beliefs assessed how specific beliefs (e.g., suffering, forgiveness, marriage) may or may not have shaped their response to IPV. In order to understand how religious leaders were connected to a larger community response, participants were asked “How, if at all, is your congregation involved in responding to IPV in the larger community through coalitions or organizations outside of your walls?” Lastly, participants were asked “What do you need as a religious leader to better respond to IPV?” The interview concluded with providing participants with a resource packed for congregations with information about organizations that respond to IPV and the coordinated community responses within Chicago in order to be aware of organizations and responses religious leaders may or could be a part of. As I conducted these interviews, I continued to learn about resources in the community and I updated this information.

For recruitment, I identified congregations and their leaders through the use of public websites and personal contacts from within the boundaries of the metropolitan City of Chicago defined by the 50 wards/neighborhoods listed on the City of Chicago’s Official Site (http://www.cityofchicago.org/city/en.html).
Conducting these interviews in a similar geographic location (i.e., Chicago) was particularly important as the social services, resources, and the larger community response to IPV may be similar for all participants in this large urban setting.

After identifying the religious leader within a congregation, I contacted the leader to personally invite them to participate in the study and/or to direct me to another religious leader (e.g., an associate pastor) in their congregation. Religious leaders who were interim or who had been a religious leader for less than six months were not included in the present study as they may have had less opportunity to respond or may be less aware of the response of their community to IPV.

I conducted these interviews in person, with the exception of one participant who requested a phone interview (W11), at a time that was convenient for the individual. The participant was informed that the interview would likely be 60-90 minutes, and would be audio-recorded at a time and location that was mutually agreed upon by the participant and myself. Upon meeting for the interview, I first obtained consent for the interview and for the interview to be audio-recorded. I then followed the interview protocol and at the end thanked the participant for their time. I then asked if there were any questions, comments, or reflections. Lastly, I provided the leader with the IPV response resource packet. The audio-recordings were then transcribed for analysis.

**Researcher**

In the next section, I will discuss my interpretivist/constructivist research paradigm in depth. However part of this paradigm is the recognition that I as the researcher need to be aware and to own my own biases, perspectives, and lens.
My experiences and beliefs have likely shaped and informed this study and thus have placed me in a position as a co-constructor of meaning as I conducted and reflected upon the interviews. My own religious identity and my identification and training as a researcher and advocate created a unique lens that I brought to the present study and in my interactions with participants.

I have grown up in the church my entire life. From a young age, I was exposed to Protestant Christianity and it continues to be a part of my life to this day. The church I grew up in supported women in leadership and I regularly saw and heard strong women lead and preach within and outside the church. During college, I also attended a private, Christian college that equipped and educated women to be pastors and lead congregations. However, neither of these settings ever addressed violence within romantic relationships explicitly and in the open. Furthermore, it was not until more recently, when I moved to the city and attended church in Chicago that I became more aware of the ways in which religious scriptures were interpreted as male headship meaning exclusive male leadership. As I learned more about these beliefs, I started to see how these beliefs could be used to justify abuse within relationships. In sermons on marriage and divorce, abuse was either never mentioned or was a brief, obligatory statement about talking to a religious leader. This “holy hush” that I observed frustrated me because my passion for justice and for advocacy comes from my religious beliefs and Christian faith.

In response to this passion and lack of response, I decided to become a rape victim advocate. The training I received in order to respond to survivors was
exceptional, but it lacked training on responding to the religious concerns of survivors. My experiences within the church and my training as an advocate helped me to see the piece of the puzzle that is missing for both organizations and the way they could interlock together. Religious leaders and organizations alike may mutually benefit from each other through engaging in creating religiously-informed best-practices that address the needs of religious survivors sensitive to both empowerment approaches to survivors and religious values. Throughout the interviews, the interplay of my researcher/advocate lens and religious identity arose at different times and likely shaped my response and understanding of these concepts and analysis. Throughout the results, I highlight a few of these moments were my advocate and religious identities intersected with particular religious beliefs in hopes of acknowledging my perspective and experiences.

Analytic Strategy

Before discussing the analysis strategy, I outline my research paradigm as this shapes my approach to the project and methodological decisions (Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Ponterotto, 2005). I used an interpretivist/constructivist research paradigm (Ponterotto, 2005). According to this paradigm, meaning is considered to be hidden and uncovered through intentional, deep engagement with the text (Ponterotto, 2005; Schwandt, 2000). Furthermore, meaning is considered co-constructed by the researcher and the participant through dialogue, first occurring in the reflective space of the interview and second as the researcher reflects on the interview text (Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Morrow, 2007; Ponterotto, 2005). In sum, meaning is subjective, is co-created by the interaction between the
researcher/participant, and is shaped by the sociocultural and historical context occupied by and surrounding both the researcher and participant (Lincoln & Guba, 1994; Ponterotto, 2005). The goal of an interpretivist/constructivist paradigm is to understand a phenomena or the “lived experience” of participants through co-constructing meaning, often by explaining reoccurring themes and patterns that emerge from the interview and text (Lincoln & Guba, 1990; Ponterotto, 2005).

In addition to my interpretivist/constructivist research paradigm, I used a specific analytic strategy to guide analysis. Specifically, I used qualitative content analysis in order to better understand how IPV intersects with the experiences of Christian religious leaders by identifying major themes and subthemes that arose from the interviews (Burnard, 1991; Graneheim & Lundman, 2004). It is important to note that content analysis can be quantitative or qualitative and there has been much debate on the use of each approach. Historically, content analysis has predominately been used as a quantitative approach focused on the enumeration of data (i.e., summative content analysis; Hsieh & Shannon, 2005; Ponterotto, 2005). However, researchers have argued that content analysis may also be a qualitative tool to examine multiple forms of textual data (e.g., text from interviews, observations, newspaper articles) or to systematically describe themes emerging from a structured examination of the data (Berg, 2001). Many argue the two simply have different foci where quantitative analysis is more objective and systematic (Berg, 2001) and qualitative analysis is more subjective, focusing on the patterns that arise from data about particular phenomena (Smith, 1975). While researchers hold varying
opinions about the appropriate use of content analysis, different forms of content analysis have emerged that ascribe to quantitative (e.g., summative content analysis; Hsieh & Shannon, 2005) or qualitative (e.g., thematic content analysis; Burnard, 1991) traditions. In the current study I used a qualitative type of thematic content analysis described below.

The qualitative thematic content analysis utilized in the present study allows researchers to create a category system that links interviews and themes together in a systematic way (Burnard, 1991). As will soon be clear, this thematic content analysis falls squarely within my interpretivist/constructivist research paradigm and other scholars have conducted content analysis from this research paradigm (Graneheim & Lundman, 2004). In short, this approach to content analysis seeks to identify emerging themes to better understand and interpret underlying meaning (Graneheim & Lundman, 2004; Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). In this process, I followed an interpretivist/constructivist paradigm that considered meaning to be hidden and brought to the surface through systematic reflection and analysis (Ponterotto, 2005). As described below, this approach allowed me to identify codes, categories, and themes from the interviews in order to describe the experiences of participants (Graneheim & Lundman, 2004). Furthermore, content analysis allows key themes to emerge from the data, while also acknowledging how the data is co-constructed between the participant and researcher through their interactions, unique characteristics, perspectives, and social positions (Morrow, 2007).

This analytic process began with writing notes (called “memos”) about
initial observations of both the setting and of general themes and reflections on the interview before, during, and after the interview. These memos were used to document initial themes and categories, while also documenting assumptions, processes, and biases in the analytic process (Burnard, 1991; Morrow, 2005). In the initial stages of analysis, transcripts were read line-by-line and initial notes were made on themes. Next, transcripts were reviewed again and I open coded as many themes as necessary to capture the content of the interview (Burnard, 1991; Graneheim & Lundman, 2004). Open codes were described as broad statements that begin to condense interview text into descriptive codes and themes (Berg, 2001; Graneheim & Lundman, 2004). These open codes were kept close to the data, drawing from the words of the participant (Berg, 2001). These open codes were then sorted into categories that grouped similar content together under higher order headings; this is a core feature of qualitative content analysis (Krippendorff, 1980). In the next stage of the coding process, I evaluated the coding themes in order to reduce repetition and to create subcategories (Burnard, 1991). Coding themes were considered a theme when the concept reoccurred across interviews and linked together meaningful concepts (Graneheim & Lundman, 2004). Overall, the goal of this stage in the analysis was to create a preliminary category system that collapsed headings into subheadings, while staying close to the content and themes of the interviews (Graneheim & Lundman, 2004).

After the preliminary category system had been condensed, I enlisted an external auditor, Dr. Nathan Todd, who reviewed a subsample of the interviews
and checked the accuracy of the themes and structure of the categories. This process was conducted four times through multiple stages of the research project as the interviews were coded and the heading structure revised. Additionally, I returned to the initial transcripts that formed the preliminary category system to check the accuracy of the evolving category system to the themes and concepts within these preliminary interviews. This resulted in a finalized category system. I then returned to the transcripts using these finalized categories to gather stories and quotes that supported or challenged the different categories (Burnard, 1991). Interview text and stories from participants were placed within the category system under the different headings in support or opposition of each theme and subtheme to help describe, define, and ground each category with explicit text from the interviews (Burnard, 1991; Graneheim & Lundman, 2004). These categories, and the associated text, form the backbone of the result as I weave together the categories, themes, and excerpts as a way to communicate the findings.

In order to determine the number of interviews to complete, I looked for theoretical saturation and redundancy of the data (Morrow, 2007). The concept of theoretical saturation is common to many qualitative approaches, such as grounded theory (Berg, 2001; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). In general, saturation is met when common patterns begin to repeat themselves and there are fewer new observations (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). From an interpretivist/constructivist paradigm, each participant’s experience is unique and adds complexity to the data, making true redundancy and saturation impossible to achieve (Morrow, 2005).
However, saturation and redundancy of the data is adequately reached when new
data does not create new findings or categories (Morrow, 2007). Thus, I
continued to engage in the process of interviewing until new interviews did not
reveal substantially unique information, which occurred around the twentieth
interview.

In qualitative methods, researchers use a variety of methods, dependent on
the research paradigm, to address the quality and trustworthiness of their data and
interpretations (Lincoln & Guba, 1994; Morrow, 2005, 2007). Given the
interpretivist/constructivist research paradigm in the study, the following steps
were taken to increase trustworthiness of the data and interpretation. First, when
possible, the analysis incorporated context and culture through reflection on my
memos and other notes made on the setting characteristics and the social context
of the leader and religious congregation. Second, the adequacy of the data (i.e.,
the length of the interviews) was ensured by allowing at least 60-90 minutes for
interviews in a place where the participant felt comfortable to disclose personal
thoughts and experiences. The average length of interviews was 59.24 minutes
($SD = 15.40$, Range 32 to 88 minutes).

Morrow (2005) discusses other aspects of trustworthiness in terms of
authenticity, reflexivity, and subjectivity. Authenticity was demonstrated through
being open to different perspectives (i.e., fairness; Morrow, 2005) and refining
themes based on participants’ experiences throughout the analytic process (i.e.,
ontological authenticity; Morrow, 2005). To increase authenticity, I closely
followed an interpretivist/constructivist paradigm through staying close to the
data (i.e., following the system of analysis; authenticity) and being open to
different views and experiences to capture multiple perspectives, allowing the
process to be improved and recreated as more data were collected (Morrow, 2005,
2007). Reflexivity and subjectivity refer to how research findings are shaped by
researcher’s biases (i.e., subjectivity) and these biases should be acknowledged
through self-reflection (reflexivity; Morrow, 2005). I navigated subjectivity and
engaged in reflexivity by acknowledging my own perspective and how this may
shape the process and interpretations in a written reflection before conducting or
analyzing any interviews (Charmaz, 2006; Graneheim & Lundman, 2004;
Morrow, 2005). Finally, to further strengthen the quality and trustworthiness of
the process (and to decrease bias inherent in subjectivity), the coding scheme was
checked a total of four times throughout the analytic process by an external
auditor who read a subsample of the interviews and reviewed the coding themes
for accuracy and quality (Creswell, 2013).

Results

Results are organized by the categories and themes that arose from the
data as shown in Table 2. Results follow the structure of the table, starting with
religious leader’s definition and description of IPV, followed by religious leader’s
views on the causes of IPV. The next section covers the religious beliefs that
informed their understanding and response to IPV and how participants’ views of
their role as a religious leader shaped their response to IPV. The results close
with religious leader’s organizational connections and needs in order to better
respond to IPV. The results are guided by the research questions proposed in the
present study while also integrating new insights based on participant responses. The purpose of the results is to not only shed light on religious leaders understanding of and responses to IPV, but also to analyze and reflect upon these responses in light of the literature outlined in the introduction on best-practice and potentially harmful responses. Throughout the analyses, I use my lens as a researcher and advocate to draw conclusions and compare the responses. My goal is not to criticize, but to draw connections and interpret the results. My hope is that this interpretation and analysis of the results may aid religious leaders and others to reflect on their own understandings and responses in order to move towards safety-focused, empowering practices with survivors of IPV.

The results are organized around the main themes and subthemes from the analyses and participant quotes are used throughout to further elaborate and clarify the theme. Table 2 outlines the themes and subthemes that make up the detail and structure of the results. Themes are in bold accompanied by a brief description. Subthemes are indented under the categories and are elaborated on in the text. An integrated Figure 1 is presented at the end of the results to summarize and synthesize key findings.
Table 2 Summary of Themes and Subthemes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme and Subthemes</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Definition and Description</strong></td>
<td>Religious leaders’ definition and description of what IPV is or is not.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Specific Acts</td>
<td>Composition of Couple/Family</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Causes</strong></td>
<td>The individual and societal causes of IPV.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Power and Control</td>
<td>Personal/Environmental Factors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cultural Norms</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Religious Beliefs</strong></td>
<td>Religious beliefs and values, informed by their understanding of the nature of God or specific scriptures, that shape their view and response to IPV.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sin</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Justice</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Shame</td>
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<tr>
<td>Suffering</td>
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<tr>
<td>Marriage</td>
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<td>Forgiveness</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Role of Leader</strong></td>
<td>How their understanding of their role as a leader shaped the strategies that they used to respond to IPV and prompted questions about how their role as a leader comes with privilege and power.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supportive</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Invited into People’s Lives</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Impact of Role on Leader</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Response to IPV</strong></td>
<td>Strategies to respond to IPV and the tensions/struggles that arose when an instance of IPV came to their attention.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wary of Boundaries</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Struggles/Tensions</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Confront</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Pray</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Utilize Resources</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Established Process</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Community</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Intervention/Prevention</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Organizational Connections/Needs</strong></td>
<td>Reflections on how their congregations are connected to organizations that address IPV (or lack thereof) and what they need to be better equipped to respond to IPV.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
It is important to note that while a handful of leaders had never responded to an instance of IPV directly, others shared a wealth of experience. Of the 20 religious leaders in the present study, 5 leaders shared a wide variety of experiences in responding to IPV, 4 leaders expressed limited experience in responding to IPV, 4 stated they did not have experience, but through the interview shared stories or experiences that they realized may have been IPV, and 8 religious leaders had no direct experience responding to IPV within their role. Thus, throughout the results religious leaders’ reflections and when possible and appropriate, their experiences in responding directly are provided as support for these themes about religious leaders’ understanding and responses to IPV.

Furthermore, to contextualize the prevalence of the findings and themes, I use the following language and provide the thresholds for utilizing each phrase: “a couple” meaning 2 participants, a “few” or “some” meaning at least three participant, “many” meaning between 6-9 participants, and “most” or “majority” meaning more than half of participants or of the particular subgroup mentioned.

**Definition and Description**

Religious leader expressed many definitions and descriptions of IPV as they discussed different types of violence or abuse and their understanding of what IPV is or is not. In general, religious leaders discussed the specific acts that constitute violence, categorized acts upon a gradation of violent behaviors from verbal to physical violence, and noted different relationship compositions that shape their understanding of IPV.
Specific acts. When asked about their understanding of IPV, most religious leaders described specific acts that constituted IPV. Religious leaders described IPV as actions that harm another individual through threats to their security and dignity or as actions that were not caring or loving towards a partner. For example, a male religious leader from a Mainline Protestant congregation defined IPV as “...anything that would rob people of their dignity, safety, and even as I think about it, to use even their own financial security” (M07, p. 5). Religious leaders mentioned threats, coercion, and unhealthy aggression as specific acts that helped inform their definition and description of IPV. These acts were seen as violent due to the harm that would be caused to another individual that impacted their well-being.

While not explicitly stated by participants, it appeared that religious leaders often discussed acts of threat, coercion, and physical injury along a spectrum of severity and tailored their response to IPV based on such severity. Religious leaders described IPV as though there was a gradation of violence, with degrading talk or name calling on the lower end (e.g., more emotional or verbal forms of violence) and actions that involve physical harm or abuse on the higher end (e.g., forms of physical violence). For instance, one Evangelical Protestant leader discussed the differences between verbal and physical violence when he shared about counseling a couple where the husband had been verbally violent. He shared how the couple was able to work through the abuse because verbal violence is different than physical violence:
But it definitely hurt their marriage and he has had a lot of hard work to try to win back her trust. But they didn’t throw it away, because again, something about just verbal abuse…yea, you lost your temper, you said something stupid, but it seems so different when someone picks you up and throws you, someone punches you in the face. (M15, p. 21)

While some leaders discussed all forms of abuse as violence that constituted IPV, throughout the interviews participants discussed physical violence differently and perhaps more seriously than the other forms of violence. Physical violence was described as “crossing the line” (M15, Evangelical Protestant congregation) both in the view of religious leaders and in their experiences working with survivors. Religious leaders described how it seemed that physical violence was a more extreme or severe form of IPV and often was associated with the end of the relationship for the survivor. The view of violence on a spectrum may be particularly important as the value or weight that is placed on a specific act of violence may shape a religious leader’s view of the associated consequence of that action and the nature of their response.

Religious leaders also discussed violence as something that builds or grows over time. Religious leaders acknowledged how “smaller actions” of violence such as hurtful comments or degrading talk may build stress over time and ignite an act of physical violence, perhaps progressing higher up on the spectrum of violence. For one male participant from a Black Protestant congregation who viewed IPV as only physical violence, he acknowledged how violence may grow over time and lead to other forms of violence such as child
abuse, “once violence starts and once that snowball starts rolling, people do things that they never would have imagined [in] their worst nightmares” (M09, p. 14). Religious leaders understood violence and IPV as a snowball effect where harmful words or actions grow over time to lead to physical violence and where the violent acts may also grow more severe over time. For instance, another male religious leader from an Evangelical Protestant congregation reflected on how violence can grow from verbal to physical violence:

> So we try to move people away from you know, hurtful words, so that’s, that’s a challenge sometimes in relationships. And that’s a lot of times what leads to violence. People, you know, um, don’t have good control of their tongue, and say something, and the other person reacts. (M4, p. 5)

While this view of violence highlights how violence may grow over time, as a researcher and advocate it is also concerning to me as it may contribute to victim-blaming responses because this view suggests that violence is provoked and not rooted in dynamics of power and control. Furthermore, this belief that violence grows from smaller to larger acts of violence is particularly interesting given that leaders expressed a pressing need to respond to physical violence, but often a hesitancy in addressing emotional or verbal violence. If violence builds and grows over time, these “lower” forms of violence may be crucial to address before they lead to further, “higher” acts of violence. However, “lower” forms of violence did not seem to produce an urgency to respond, perhaps contributing to a lack of early intervention or prevention and a minimization of IPV. Furthermore, a spectrum of violence with “lower” forms of violence may miss the negative
impacts emotional or verbal violence has on survivors. By not responding to these acts of violence with the same urgency as physical violence, survivors may feel that their experiences are not validated or taken as seriously as “higher” forms of violence.

**Composition of couple/family.** When discussing their understanding of IPV, some religious leaders housed their description within the context of specific compositions of relationships. A couple of religious leaders speculated if IPV happens between family members or close friends, seemingly defining the word “intimate” to mean close relationships instead of an intimate romantic relationship. Mostly religious leaders placed their definition of IPV in the context of married couples, while fewer also noted dating couples. While not all religious leaders detailed their understanding of IPV within the context of same-gender relationships, 4 religious leaders from Mainline Protestant congregations often acknowledged IPV within the context of same-gender couples. A Black Protestant religious leader who acknowledged that IPV could happen in all romantic relationships expressed how his biblical views of relationships likely inhibited a same-gender couple from seeking help in their congregation,

> When there are…same-sex relationships, we don’t believe that is a biblical expression of Godly marriage, so we typically don’t see a lot of that being expressed…It is unlikely that they would be bring those intimate partner details to our leadership, and it’s not that they’re not welcome to, it’s just that they do understand our [stance].” (M09, p. 16)
I will discuss the implications of the context of relationship later when describing leader’s responses.

Causes

Following from their definition and description of IPV, religious leaders discussed the causes or “roots” of IPV from their perspective and understanding of IPV. Religious leaders discussed both individual and societal causes of IPV touching on dynamics of power and control, cultural norms, and personal or environmental factors.

Power and control. Religious leaders expressed how IPV is rooted in dynamics of power and control within relationships and perpetuated by society at large through structures that reinforce patriarchy, harmful views of manhood, and power differentials. While discussing power and control as a cause of IPV, participants often linked this to a belief that IPV is a learned behavior from the past, which while noted in this section, will be discussed in further detail within the personal/environmental factors section.

Power and control was understood by many participants as a dynamic of patriarchy where a system gives power to men and excludes women from power and leadership. For those who were trained within feminist theology, this cause of violence was particularly salient. W18 from a Mainline Protestant congregation elaborated on her theological lens and how her understanding of patriarchy informed her views about the causes of IPV:

A general sense of entitlement and being in charge…that has to do with power dynamics as well…Well you know, patriarchy. I mean that's part
of my theological lens…so some of the assumptions of patriarchy…I think it provides a scaffolding of justification for certain kinds of behavior. I think it provides, perhaps, the background for the modeling of some of that behavior that boys might grow up with in some family settings. (W18, p. 11)

Patriarchy and entitlement were discussed as creating structures and environments that prioritized men and contributed to IPV through reinforcing male dominance or control over others who were weaker. This larger societal dynamic was linked to a reinforcement of violent behaviors or to a justification of violence as a way to gain power or control.

The idea that power imbalances are a cause of IPV was elaborated on by religious leaders within specific settings and contexts. As religious leaders reflected on power and control, they described specific contexts and settings that individuals may lack power and control and use violence as a means to gain power back. M13 from a Mainline Protestant congregation speculated that acts of power and aggression were linked to a culture within work settings, specifically for affluent people or those in mid-management, where employees lacked power and control.

I think they come home from work, often, beaten-down or kept in their place and then they join in a church board or a neighborhood board or something, and they’re really seeking what they haven’t gotten at work or haven’t gotten at home or…and…it’s kinda—some people are kinda loaded. (M13, p. 9)
This religious leader explored how IPV may be in response to stressors or in response to feeling powerless. From this perspective, acts of violence and aggression are a means to regain power at the expense of another person.

Other leaders discussed power and control as connected to a history of oppression or lack of control over their circumstances. One male, Black Protestant leader expressed how violence was learned from witnessing it within one’s home, which will be discussed in depth later. However this leader also noted how dynamics of power and control may be linked to times of slavery and a response to oppression and control.

Again there may be reasons, not valid ones, but there may be reasons why you saw what you saw; from parents not being in the home, dads to ya know going back honestly just a few generations to, ya know, slave relationships and control being a big part of relationships.” (M9, p. 20)

It seemed that this leader and others viewed violence as a learned behavior, where violence was used as a means to maintain control and may continue to be used as a normative display of power. It may also be that the power differentials present within relationships are responsive to acts that have stripped away one’s power or it may be dynamics of patriarchy that contribute to IPV.

Cultural norms. Religious leaders detailed cultural norms that create a context for or condone IPV. They explored diverse perspectives they had encountered that were based on international cultural beliefs justifying violence against women, racial/ethnic norms in the U.S., and religious norms. Three of the religious leaders interviewed identified their congregation as a multicultural
congregation. Interestingly, these religious leaders discussed the cultural beliefs of different populations within their congregation, such as refugees, immigrants, and international students, and how these beliefs informed some of their member’s views on violence against women. Religious leaders reflected on how cultural beliefs that justify violence against women or wives arose in their experiences of counseling couples: “I had one couple – they were from another continent and I think his culture you know, I think wives, you can treat them however you want…so I had to link them with a pastor from his continent” (M4, Evangelical Protestant, p. 7). For this religious leader, he found cultural differences difficult to work through given a cultural acceptance of violence towards wives and thus, referred the couple to another pastor familiar with the cultural framework. Religious leaders expressed a difficulty in wanting to respect the individual’s culture, while also challenging an acceptance of violence against women because it contributes to a setting that condones and supports IPV.

Religious leaders also highlighted cultural norms in the U.S. as a cause of IPV, more specifically a cultural norm of manhood. This cultural norm of manhood asserts that being a man means using violence, perhaps to demonstrate masculinity, to assert dominance and control. Interestingly, both religious leaders from Black Protestant congregations who participated in the study noted how their congregation directly addressed this view of manhood within their church, seeing it as a common belief among members of their congregation. One male religious leader of a Black Protestant congregation wondered if the racial/ethnic norms of their congregation members such as parents using physical discipline or
the models (or lack their of) of manhood from fathers may further enforce or shape this cultural norm around violence. Other religious leaders from different racial/ethnic groups also discussed how parents may play a key role in shaping the behaviors of their children, and emphasized the role of fathers in demonstrating models of manhood to their sons. One male religious leader from a Mainline Protestant congregation noted how he viewed his role as a role model to his son:

I would like to think that I am a good model for what I want my son to be as a father and as a man and uh you know I invest a lot of uh my time in the men’s movement [a movement to redefine masculinity as non-violent] to show models of manhood. How can you be strong without being violent? How can you be emotionally open and available? It was all stuff I had to learn cause that was not taught to me by my father. (M08, p. 7)

This religious leader and others noted how such a norm within a congregation or within society, may be used to justify a man’s act of violence against another person as an acceptable expression of manhood and should be addressed within congregations. For one Black Protestant religious leader, his view on the importance of role models, particularly father figures, and the learned nature of violence motivated his congregation to focus on parenting courses to build healthy families as a way to prevent violence.

**Personal/environmental factors.** Personal characteristics or environmental factors were identified by religious leaders as shaping an acceptance or normalization of violence. More specifically, participants discussed whether violence was a result of nature (personal characteristics) versus
nurture (environmental factors). Leaders questioned whether environmental factors shape violent behaviors or if some people have a predisposition towards violence.

I think there’s environmental factors. There’s stresses over you know, money, over family, over decision making, but I also believe that there are people who are predisposed to be violent persons because of what they’ve experienced in their life or you know however they were made or formed…We all get frustrated or annoyed…but not all of us resort to violence in those moments and people do and I think some of that is attributed to the environment around that relationship, but I think some of it is the character and nature of the person. (M08, Mainline Protestant, p. 4)

Many religious leaders reflected on the causes of IPV noting the interplay of both nature and nurture that contributed to instances of IPV. Indeed, while speculating about the nature and/or nurture origins of IPV, religious leaders discussed factors such as stress and conflict, a past history of abuse, and relationship dynamics.

Overarching across personal and environmental contributors to IPV, religious leaders discussed the role of stress within IPV. Stress and conflict were noted as being a source of pressure, which may build to an act of violence or to more severe forms of violence. These stressors were noted as being socioeconomic, relational, and systemic factors that contributed to the overall well-being of individuals or a couple. Religious leaders noted how these stressors may cause strain on relationships and when compounded with multiple stressors,
foster reactionary responses as people “cannot often differentiate between…the stresses they feel and the judgments they make” (M13, Mainline Protestant, p. 8). Religious leaders felt that individuals may struggle to cope with these stressors because individuals have not learned proper coping skills. Thus, individuals may not know how to cope with stressors and these stressors may compound into a reactionary response of violence.

As leaders reflected on the causes of IPV, they often discussed how there are multiple systems and social issues that place stress on specific persons. For instance, the interviews for this study coincided with the beginning of the “Black Lives Matter” movement in response to police violence against young Black men throughout the U.S. and in Chicago specifically. Both Black Protestant leaders along with religious leaders from other denominations noted the rise in racial tensions and stressors related to the history of oppression and current social movements such as “Black Lives Matter.” Religious leaders reflected on how the stressors caused by the violence Black youth have witnessed or experienced may shape a reactive response to other stressors and be a root cause of IPV for Black men. A male religious leader from a Black Protestant congregation reflected on how racism and the pressures of society may contribute to violence like IPV:

I think the pressures of society, particularly in the African American community, you know, I'm just going to be very candid, I think that African Americans have a very difficult road to hold because of the issues of racism. I mean this season of Black Lives Matter, I think that the
pressures of our society, people...bring that home and as a result can lash out or whatever the case may be.” (M20, BP, p. 2)

In addition to stressors related to racial/ethnic tensions, religious leaders reflected on how a penal system may create further stressors as individuals who have a record experience financial stressors as a result of not being employed in well paying jobs due to their prison record. One male, Mainline Protestant leader reflected on how a penal system “not only punishes people for their crimes but continues through the rest of their life to punish them, they can become these abusers because we’ve created these animals” (M07, p. 6). Religious leaders recognized systemic reasons behind stressors and reflected on these stressors, noting injustices or challenges to someone’s value or humanity as a result of oppressive or harmful systems within society. Religious leaders who discussed the systemic roots to violence were often religious leaders who also emphasized religious beliefs about justice as a motivating and guiding factor to their response to IPV, such a belief motivated them to address oppression, violence, and inequities in their role as a religious leader and as a follower of Christ discussed in further later on in the results.

Participants also noted that a normalization of violence may also be perpetuated and reinforced within the home of individuals who witnessed or experienced violence growing up. Indeed, when asked about the origins of IPV, most religious leaders mentioned a past history of abuse within families as a cause of IPV. Leaders felt IPV was generational, learned and repeated by those who have experienced or seen IPV within their homes growing up:
Usually some of the greatest contributors to violence have been people who have been exposed to violence themselves, that would be true as we look at how to deal with issues of violence amongst young people, the instances of persons who have been violated and hurt themselves, and seeing it…some of the those who wouldn’t be involved in it have been exposed to it and seeing it in their homes. (M07, Mainline Protestant, p. 6)

Leaders felt that witnessing or experiencing this violence was a cause of perpetrating violence. From this belief, violence is a learned behavior where perpetrators are recreating interactions or reacting to situations in similar ways to their own experiences of abuse. This view may have implications for intervention or prevention strategies as congregations may focus their efforts on the overall health of the family.

Leaders who held a generational perspective of IPV often shared a view that the roots of IPV resided in further family struggles with alcoholism or mental illness. Issues such as alcoholism or experiences with mental illness were associated with a generational view of family issues that leaders felt were intertwined, noting the comorbidity of mental illness, substance abuse, and violence in the stories of IPV they have heard or witnessed. One male religious leader from an Evangelical Protestant congregation explained the generational nature of these factors by sharing his own experience in working with couples seeking help for IPV:

Along the way you kind of look at their family background, and so often you can just look backwards into their family and into their grandparents
and great-grandparents and you see these things running downhill with alcoholism and often that’s paired with anger, and it’s really kind of tragic, but it comes from God’s words saying “Well it’s in the dust,” it’s generational. (M06, p. 11)

Thus, IPV was viewed as generational and stressful factors such as experiences with mental illness, substance abuse, or past experiences with abuse were seen as exacerbating this exposure to violence. Informed by this perspective, religious leaders viewed past experience of exposures to abuse as a warning indicator for IPV and often followed up with couples or individuals to ensure the past exposure had been processed with a counseling professional.

The idea of responsibility for one’s actions arose multiple times within the interviews, but in an unexpected way. Religious leaders from a variety of backgrounds discussed the importance of recognizing the personal factors of the survivor that may have contributed to the violence within the relationship, expressing a view that violence is not unprovoked or unescalated. Leaders discussed how survivors may provoke perpetrators through creating stressors or through their own experiences with mental illness. Such a view was relayed in a variety of ways, but leaders often provided examples from their own experiences. For example, one male leader from an Evangelical Protestant congregation reflected on an instance where he responded to IPV when the wife said the husband hit her:

Usually there’s some reciprocity, “Well she slapped me.” Ya know in a recent case of a couple married maybe 10 years, ya know, she’s telling me,
“He grabbed in some very sensitive areas and was yelling at me,” and so I talked to him and, “She slapped me and then that’s what caused it,” then I talk to her and, “Well he was standing over me, yelling at me,” and I talked to him, “Well it’s because she’s on my back all the time.” And it’s kind of tennis match back and forth where it escalated, and of course you never get the whole truth at the beginning. (M6, p. 8)

The view that violence in a relationship is reciprocal informed the responses of some religious leaders who emphasized the importance of hearing both sides and of encouraging both partners to determine their contribution to the context that normalized or provoked violence. While these leaders reflected on the potential mutuality of violence, this perspective may not take into account power differentials in the relationship or the potential for this attitude to blame the victim. Indeed, the idea of the victim causing the abuse may be used as a tool for the perpetrator to blame their partner for their abusive actions. While some religious leaders emphasized mutual responsibility, as an advocate and researcher I believe that such a view must take into account the dynamics of power or manipulation often occurring within abusive relationships.

While discussing their understanding of IPV, a group of religious leaders shared their own experiences with IPV as survivors or witnesses of abuse between partners. These leaders described how their understanding have been shaped by their experiences as they reflected on the norms, beliefs, and values of violence that were used to justify the violence they experienced. These religious leaders discussed how they have a unique perspective that embraced the difficulties, hurts,
and complications that IPV causes: “Because in our immediate family it’s had a profound effect, devastating effect. That’s maybe why I’m more sensitive than others” (M9, Black Protestant, p. 22). Another Black Protestant leader, reflected on his understanding of IPV and of forgiveness as a result of seeing his father’s abuse toward his mother and witnessing her response to not forgive his father. He recognized how his views of forgiveness may be uniquely shaped and sensitive to the plight of survivors because of witnessing his own mother’s abuse and healing process. Indeed, these religious leaders reflected on how their own exposure to violence gave them a sensitivity to the experiences of survivors and shaped the religious beliefs that arose when discussing IPV. Regardless of a personal experience with IPV, religious leaders understood IPV in a variety of ways, which shaped their description of what constituted and caused IPV.

**Religious Beliefs**

Religious texts, beliefs, or values also informed how religious leaders viewed and responded to IPV. Religious leaders shared religious beliefs and values, informed by their understanding of the nature of God or specific scriptures, which shaped their view and response to IPV. Religious leaders discussed religious beliefs often as two sides of the same coin, where religious beliefs about the same topic, such as forgiveness, could be understood in both helpful and harmful ways. When religious leaders highlighted harmful beliefs and values, they often framed these beliefs as rooted in “bad theology” or religious beliefs and values that they felt were harmful, misguided, or false to their understanding of God, specific scriptures, or Christianity. For example, religious leaders
lamented on how some scriptures have been used to justify abuse, specifically scriptures related to headship, submission, and gender roles. Leaders expressed frustration about the ways in which religious beliefs have been used to justify violence or to encourage women to stay in an abusive situation. Throughout this section on religious beliefs, specific examples of “bad theology” and helpful religious beliefs will be given. While many religious leaders discussed the theoretical piece of their beliefs and responses, they shared limited experience in directly responding to IPV. Thus, as I discuss the different subthemes, religious leader’s reflections are discussed and when possible, their experiences in responding to IPV. More specific details about different responses will be included in the “Responses to IPV” section.

**Sin.** Related to religious leaders’ definition and description of IPV, participants reflected on why IPV happens, sharing religious beliefs about IPV being sin and about the sinful nature of humanity. Religious leaders shared a view of IPV as sin because it is hurting another and against what God desires for his people or relationships (i.e., a cultural rebellion against God). Along with the view of IPV as sin, religious leaders linked IPV to other sins such as arrogance, self-centeredness, and a desire for control or power. M15, a religious leader from a conservative, Evangelical congregation expressed this view of IPV as sin and against what God would want when he stated:

Ultimately I do believe that the reason that there is violence among people is that there is just a nature within people to being selfish, angry…There is a falling short of what God wants for people because we rebelled against
This religious leaders and others viewed IPV as a sin because the action of violence is against what God wants for people or is not what God calls his people to do and thus, is a rebellion against God. A view of IPV as a sinful action may shape strategies leaders use to address IPV in relationships, such as emphasizing accountability for perpetrator’s actions and a focus on repentance from their sin against God and against the survivor. This view may encourage responses at the individual level if individual sin is viewed as the issue or it may encourage larger cultural or systematic responses if IPV is viewed within a larger framework of a culture rebelling against what God wants and the need to address these issues on a larger scale.

Related to the view that IPV is sin, religious leaders reflected on their view of sin and the nature of humanity either as innately good or as innately sinful. A few religious leaders discussed the differences between the beliefs of original sin versus innate goodness within their understanding of IPV. They noted beliefs of original sin holds that humanity is innately sinful and broken, while beliefs of innate goodness holds that humankind is by nature good and whole. Indeed, from the view of original sin, brokenness or individual’s harmful actions are the cause of innocent suffering, while innate goodness holds the perspective that bad things just happen but that people are created good. While views of suffering will be discussed in further depth later on, it is important to distinguish how religious views of sin shaped religious leaders’ understanding of humanity and the religious
roots of sin and IPV. These views shaped how religious leaders understood and responded to IPV because leaders who view IPV as a consequence of original sin addressed the actions of perpetrators from an individual perspective, focusing more heavily on accountability for the perpetrator. One leader from an Evangelical Protestant congregation discussed how his view of IPV as sin informed how selfishness, anger, and sin needed to be addressed as part of a response:

Certainly I do believe that our world um is in rebellion to God. I do believe the story of the Bible that God’s creation has rebelled against him and I think as a result, there is conflict in inner personal relationships. And certainly I believe that the Gospel, the good news about Jesus Christ, can bring healing to those relationships but ultimately I do believe that the reason that there is violence among people is that there is just a nature within people to being selfish, angry…that ultimately needs to be addressed as part of the solution…I would use the word sin. Yeah, there is a fallenness. There is a falling short of what God wants for people because we rebelled against Him. (M15, EP, p. 6-7)

Alternatively, those who believed in innate goodness tended to focus on contextual factors that led to violence and emphasized the importance of addressing the systemic roots of violence. For example, one female religious leader from a Mainline Protestant congregation (W2) who emphasized the goodness of humanity linked IPV and it’s roots to contextual factors such as exposure to familial violence, bad theology, and patriarchy:
“And I think some of it stems from really bad theology. I think some of it stems from such a deep and long history of patriarchy…There are many men, not all, many men who, you know, in some way kind of buy into the notion of patriarchy and the notion that woman are to be subordinate to men. And so along with that goes this terrible, harmful idea that if a man gets a little rough, the woman needs to put up with it because she’s subordinate. It’s so, so damaging.” (W2, p. 10)

Religious leaders’ views of sin and it’s relationship to violence may be particularly important given the implications this may have on intervention strategies. It may be that views of sin may shape religious leaders’ strategies to address IPV within relationships, specifically if the root cause is sin, religious leaders may focus on more internal, religious interventions at the expense of looking outward to potential environmental or systemic contributors to IPV.

**Shame.** Another key belief that arose as religious leaders discussed IPV was shame. Religious leaders described messages about shame they had heard or speculated impacted a survivor’s decision to leave or disclose their abuse to others. More specifically, religious leaders reflected on how messages such as survivors deserved the abuse or embarrassment about having experienced abuse negatively impacted survivors. These messages of shame may encourage survivors to stay silent or search for what they may have done wrong to deserve the abuse. Some religious leaders discussed shame as a reason for why there has been a general lack of conversation about IPV, which perpetuates the cycle of shame further through not addressing or talking about IPV, “what kind of perpetuates the cycle
is shame around it, lots of shame, the person, the victim having shame, the abuser having shame, families having shame about it” (W19, Mainline Protestant, p. 6). At multiple levels, shame perpetuates this holy hush about IPV, which may be further informed by other religious beliefs discussed next.

Leaders shared specific religious views about suffering and forgiveness that may induce shame and blame survivors for the abuse; these beliefs will be introduced in the context of shame, but will be discussed in further depth in subsequent sections on suffering and forgiveness separately. Beliefs about suffering being a result of one’s sins were described by religious leaders as shaming survivors as the abuse becomes a result of their actions and something they did wrong. A male religious leader in an Evangelical Protestant congregation shared how in much of Christian theology, people wrongfully contribute abuse or suffering to sin and blessings to pleasing God. This leader shared how in the context of abuse, this belief may be particularly problematic:

And so when you’ve got that sort of like seep into you, the Christian faith, like if we appease God or if we live a good life, or whatever, then God will bless us with whatever. So you’ve got folks that are being abused, and they’re like, “So what did I do wrong?” Well you didn’t do anything wrong, you know? You are, I mean who knows what it is in that specific case of abuse, but you are being abused and it’s not okay. (M10, p. 15)

This harmful theology may shame survivors through messages of deserving abuse or abuse as punishment for their sinful actions and may be a tool used by perpetrators to blame survivors for their abusive actions.
Additionally, values about forgiveness were noted as informing a belief that forgiveness in any circumstance is a mark of a true, good Christian. One female, Mainline Protestant leader emphasized how this high emphasis on forgiveness as being a “good Christian” impacted survivors if they are struggling or cannot forgive their abuser. This leader expressed how when a survivor’s faith is judged on their ability to forgive it “add[ed] shame to it or the guilt to it as I can't forgive or I'm not able to…I'm not a good Christian” (W19, p. 10).

Furthermore, these messages of not being good enough or of deserving abuse were noted as potential tools perpetrators used to diminish and discredit survivor’s sense of worth or humanity. For example, one male leader listed shame as one of the tactics perpetrators may use against survivors, “I think it ranges from everything from name calling and belittling and degrading people verbally…to physically…trying to control another person’s life, isolate them, shame them” (M16, MP, p. 4). These messages were seen as one form of verbal and emotional abuse that perpetrators may use to harm survivors.

Additionally, religious leaders felt that these messages of shame may inhibit survivors from disclosing or seeking help for their abuse, reinforcing the ways religious beliefs perpetuate a “holy hush” about IPV. One male religious leader from an Evangelical Protestant congregation emphasized the importance of community awareness to reduce the stigma for survivors because there is “a lot of shame for people to admit that they are being victimized, that they’re not being loved by their spouse, or that they are being so badly treated. It’s hard to bring that out into public” (M15, p. 25). This appeared to feel that community
awareness about IPV may help to minimize the shame around IPV and facilitate survivor help-seeking. These findings were unexpected, but extremely interesting given how religious leaders emphasized the uses of messages of worth and a God-given identity to counteract shame and bring hope when responding to IPV.

**Worth.** While discussing shameful message and beliefs, religious leaders expressed how messages of worth were used in both harmful and helpful ways, as a tool of perpetrators to induce feelings of worthlessness, shame, or blame and as a strategy of religious leaders to counteract these messages. Religious leaders shared messages about worth that arose within their experiences responding to IPV or in their understanding of IPV. They brought up phrases perpetrators used to diminish the survivor’s worth:

Picture a woman who goes to church whose partner does not go to church and maybe has no faith whatsoever. And so, when, when the partner is angry, controlling, wants to injure or abuse the woman in some way, easily can refer to all of the ways she’s bad, you know. ‘You’re sinful…you go to church trying to be better, but you’re never gonna be better.’ I mean you can just imagine… ‘Nothing can redeem you. No God can save you.’ (W2, Mainline Protestant, p. 12)

Religious leaders framed these messages as particularly harmful to survivors as they diminished survivors’ view of themselves, and may negatively impact their decision to leave or disclose the abuse.

While these messages were used by perpetrators to harm survivors, religious leaders discussed specific strategies and messages they used to
counteract these negative messages. Religious leaders seemed to respond to these messages, directly or indirectly, through a belief that a crucial step in their process of responding to IPV was to affirm the survivor’s worth and dignity. Leaders discussed messages of the innate value of each person and messages of grace, “that you are loved, that you are precious, that you are worthy of love” (M16, Mainline Protestant, p. 7), as key responses that hold potential to be healing and restorative. Some religious leaders felt that message of worth were often validated and supported through community and participation in the church (e.g. communion, baptism, worship, scripture), and emphasized the role of community within their response. Throughout the interviews, the dignity of people and specifically of survivors was raised as a key belief that motivated religious leaders and their congregations to work against injustices and provide healing spaces within a loving community. Perhaps this intervention of encouraging survivors into community directly counteracts the “holy hush” or messages of shame and isolation that perpetrators may use. Thus, messages of worth were seen as potentially healing for survivors of IPV, but religious leaders also shared how they had been distorted by perpetrators who utilized shame to harm or control survivors.

*God’s image.* Religious leaders also discussed how a belief that each person is made in the image of God may also shape and inform their response to IPV. The view of each person as made in the image of God reaffirmed the worth that the person has and was another way that religious leaders counteracted message of shame and harmful religious ideologies that may perpetuate violence.
In discussing views of marriage, one female, Mainline Protestant leader noted how “the whole concept of Imago Dei, the whole concept that we’re all created in the image of God…is first and foremost” (W14, Mainline Protestant, p. 9) and this was central to her understanding of healthy relationships and caring for others in non-violent ways. Another religious leader, a female head pastor from a Mainline Protestant congregation phrased it similarly, once again emphasizing the value and equality between every person “created in the image of God. No, no one person has more value than another person” (W2, p. 11). These messages about being created in the image of God shaped religious leaders understanding of the value of each person and the identity and rights that each person has, including a right to not live in fear of violence, and encouraged them to respond to IPV. For example, one female, Mainline Protestant leader noted: “helping people understand their worth and identity on their own and that God’s intention is not for them to live in violence or fear or anything negative. God desires good things for his people” (W19, p. 9). Leaders emphasized this view as key to their understanding of IPV as well as to their views about justice and non-violent relationships.

**Justice.** Beliefs about the dignity of all persons informed another prominent religious belief of justice that motivated religious leaders in their response to IPV. Leaders discussed religious beliefs about compassion and the call for justice they read about in Jesus' actions throughout the Bible as forming a value of justice and a need to address violence. Justice was described in a variety of ways from helping those who are put down to larger social responses:
“champion[ing] the underdog…justice is not just personal but it’s social…Most people connect their faith to individual acts, helping individuals, but I believe it’s making the connections in the larger society.” (M13, Mainline Protestant, p. 13). Indeed, some leaders defined justice as acts of kindness, such as serving and giving to others, while some religious leaders extended this view to include working against oppressive structures and “learning to be a part of the struggle for justice, as part of our call to live out our faith” (M16, Mainline Protestant, p. 12). Thus, how religious leaders understand justice may also inform how they view IPV and inform the focus (i.e., individual needs versus societal change) of the intervention or prevention efforts they support or are involved in.

For many religious leaders, their motivation to act was a result of their understanding of Jesus valuing and demonstrating justice in his actions. Leaders felt they were following Jesus’s example through helping those who are oppressed, citing times in the Bible where Jesus acted subversively to those in power and empowered those who were disadvantaged. Specifically, religious leaders mentioned Jesus’ egalitarian actions towards women in a patriarchal culture as one example of his actions and promotion of a just culture. Another male, Mainline Protestant leader cited a passage in the Bible in the book of Luke about how Jesus starts his ministry stating radical and justice-oriented goals focused on those who were disadvantaged:

Jesus is just starting off his ministry…and says, “The spirit of the Lord is upon me because I’ve been called to give sight to the blind, and to help the
poor, and…to make the lame walk and… free the captives…” it’s all about doing justice in the world. (M03, p. 11-12)

This leader, and others, identified their role and response as leaders to be one of justice through restoring dignity and counteracting oppression for those who were disadvantaged. This belief motivated religious leaders to respond to the injustice of violence through resources to survivors or challenging oppressive beliefs or systems.

**Suffering.** Another religious belief that shaped religious leader’s understanding and response to IPV was suffering. Religious leaders were often confronted with a view of suffering, for themselves or survivors, as they heard and responded to instances of IPV. Many leaders reflected on the harmful messages or “bad theology” about suffering that have justified abuse or have encouraged women to stay in situations containing IPV. One leader reflected on how she does not believe in the idea that suffering is something someone is called to stay in suffering because it is God’s doing:

> I will never tell someone that God hasn’t given them any more than they can handle or that God put them in this situation for a reason. Like those are things that I would never feel comfortable saying. I think the God I believe in is compassionate enough to be with us in those moments and to love us and surround us in those moments but I don’t think God intentionally inflicts those moments upon us. (W14, MP, p. 12)

As leaders discussed suffering, they often mentioned how harmful ideologies are linked to the messages of shame previously discussed and noted the role shame
plays in keeping survivors from disclosing or seeking help. Multiple religious leaders discussed examples of characters who suffered in the Bible such as Job and Jonah in order to give survivors examples of suffering and to work to mitigate the shame associated with suffering. Religious leaders discussed these stories, continuing to emphasize that there are not clear reasons for suffering at times:

In the book of Job, when Job suffered all that he did, at the end when God spoke to him, God never answered why—God never told Job why he had to endure the suffering that he had to suffer. What God told to Job is, ‘I have come to show up to meet with you because you are that important to me.’ (M15, Evangelical Protestant, p. 17)

This religious leader shared how this story also shaped his own response to individuals who were sufferings as he stated, “I always emphasize that even though there has been this unjust suffering in your life, that in no way negates the importance you have before God” (M15, Evangelical Protestant, p. 17). Once again, a message of worth of the person to God is a religious belief that arose for religious leader in understanding and responses to suffering and IPV more generally. Thus, when discussing worth and shame with survivors, religious leaders emphasized it may also be important to address suffering, counteract harmful messages, and support survivors in their time of suffering through offering community. The threads of shame and suffering are tightly woven in religious leader’s understanding and response of suffering within the context of IPV as leaders shared their own understandings of the role of suffering in the lives
of people and the response of Christ within suffering based on their own beliefs and the stories of survivors that they shared.

As religious leaders discussed suffering, they highlighted specific views of suffering that when combined with circumstances of abuse and violence, form particularly harmful theology about the causes and reasons for suffering. One particularly harmful ideology was the view that suffering is caused by an individual’s actions. While not all religious leaders disagreed with the idea of sin being a possible cause of suffering, many cautioned against this belief in the context of IPV because it may further shame the victim or may be a tool used by the perpetrator to blame the victim. Indeed, leaders reflected on instances where amidst suffering individuals wondered if they had done something to deserve the suffering or were asked by others what they did to bring on suffering. This harmful belief motivated leaders to emphasize that survivors did not bring on nor deserve the abuse. One male, Mainline Protestant religious leader shared how in his response to a woman sharing about her previous experience with abuse, he made sure to “let her know that she didn’t deserve it or do anything to provoke it” (M8, p. 4). Religious leaders felt it was particularly important to speak against blaming survivors of IPV for the suffering because it may counteract shame survivors feel about the abuse and may be important for survivors of IPV to hear religious leaders to validate their experience of abuse without such blame.

Leaders linked the view of suffering being caused by a survivor’s actions to another “bad theology” people may hold about suffering: that bad situations are God’s punishment for one’s wrongdoings or sin and thus, something one is called
to endure. This view of suffering is related to a view of God and how God interacts, punishes, and responds to people who have sinned. One male leader from an Evangelical Protestant congregation who reflected on suffering and the role of God emphasized:

There are people that have the theology that think that God makes bad things happen to good people. I just don’t think it’s a scriptural idea…somewhere along the line the church made suffering itself evil. And I think there is evil in the midst of suffering, but it’s not like the absence of God, or it’s not that God causes these sorts of things, but rather suffering is sort of part of the human condition…I think suffering does happen and I think we cause suffering on others and I don’t think that’s acceptable. (M10, p. 14)

Leaders felt this view perpetuated harmful beliefs of suffering because suffering becomes something that individual should endure as it was allowed by God or “their cross to bear.” Religious leaders emphasized how the ideology of bearing one’s cross is misunderstood and has created “…some notoriously bad theology and [a] destructive role of the church trying to keep women or people that are abused in bad relationships or not holding their partners fully accountable for the violence, your cross to bear … crap like that” (M16, Mainline Protestant, p. 11).

Once again, religious leaders linked suffering and shame to harmful ideologies that blamed women for the abuse and encouraged them to endure their suffering because suffering was viewed as caused by God.
From their own experience in responding to IPV, religious leaders emphasized counteracting these harmful ideologies because their view of who God is and how God acts was not in line with how these harmful ideologies depicted God. Leaders emphasized that suffering is not something that “God intentionally inflicts…upon [people]” and that enduring suffering does not make a person more Christ-like (W14, Mainline Protestant, p. 14). Alternatively, religious leaders saw God as compassionate amidst people’s suffering and, through Christ, saw God as near to those who were suffering:

Stuff happens and how we manage in the midst of suffering and can I see Christ suffering with me in the midst of my suffering? Yes. Can I see Christ understanding that or empathizing with me or like crying out with me: ‘My God, My God, Why have you forsaken me?’ Like, “Why the ‘f’ is this happening?” That’s more where I see Christ with me, but not saying, ‘Well this is my cross to bear.’ I’m like, no. It’s not your cross to bear. I don’t think, I don’t believe that we are called to do it so that we can be like Christ. (W1, Mainline Protestant, P. 17)

This leader and others expressed how suffering itself is not something that makes a person more Christ-like, but rather it is in suffering that people may see and experience Christ with them in their suffering. Religious leaders reflected on suffering as a space where Christ is with an individual in their suffering, which will be expanded upon further in the next section.

Redemption. While leaders emphasized that individuals are not called to endure suffering, religious leaders further expanded on how they viewed Christ as
redemptive within suffering. There were two main ways that leaders shared that
Christ redeems suffering. The first was in the wisdom and growth that may come
from times of challenge and reliance on God. One male, Mainline Protestant
leader reflected on his own personal times of suffering noting how “in my own
life and I think for many people, that times of suffering or times of failure or
desert times…can be extremely fertile occasions for wisdom to blossom in our
lives…. that God is close to us in our suffering” (M16, p. 10). Leaders talked
about how suffering may be used in individual’s lives to grow them or strengthen
their character or faith in God, but leaders were also clear to not link this to a
reason to endure suffering or stay in an abusive situation.

The second way leaders viewed Christ redeeming suffering was through
the supportive role of the congregational community. Leaders discussed how
suffering was a place where the love and care of Christ may be expressed in the
response of the congregational community. The interview that stood out the most
about suffering, redemption, and community was with a male pastor in an
Evangelical Protestant congregation who discussed a situation of counseling a
survivor of abuse and related it to situations of suffering he had encountered as a
religious leader like IPV, sexual assault, and in his own life, the loss of a loved
one:

The suck level doesn’t change…like, what happened to you absolutely
sucks, you know? There’s not language that we can even give to how
terrible it is. But then we use the language of in…then we start talking
about how God works through the community and shows love. You know
the suck level doesn’t change, but there’s redemption that comes through that. Like it doesn’t change the fact that it happened, like it’s not like “Oh that’s okay, it’s getting better.” But that’s always going to be there, it’s always going to be a part of her story, and who she is, and it’s always going to suck, and that’s never going to change. But there’s ways to see that through this like she’s being lifted up, she’s being held up by a community, she’s being loved, and her family is okay, and there is redemption in the suck, but that, that reality. And that was something that she and I were able to hold onto together, and it made more sense to her than “Oh God must have meant that to happen.” Well that’s a problem theologically, right? It’s a huge problem. So when I was a kid, one of the things that sort of shaped my identify is my siblings were killed in a car accident. And I heard people tell me all sorts of things that they thought were Godly, or helpful, and they weren’t. And so, I don’t know if I’m talking about, you know, abusive relationships exactly, but it’s that same sort of things where you don’t try to change the reality, or gloss over it, but at the same time try to realize that in the darkness there can be light, if that makes any sense. (M10, p. 13-14)

This leader summarizes the sentiments of other religious leaders in the belief that suffering is terrible, but there were ways the suffering could be redeemed without diminishing the hurt of the suffering itself. Religious leaders held that Christ in his role and through a Christian community works to redeem suffering through compassion, comfort, and love. Religious leaders who valued community in this
way often discussed the importance of survivors being connected to community as part of their response, which will be discussed in further depth later.

**Marriage.** Religious beliefs about marriage and religious leader’s understanding of the purpose of marriage were instrumental in how they responded to IPV. Leaders described marriage as a lifelong “vow to love like God loves, unconditionally” (M16, Mainline Protestant, p. 9), “a real equality of partnership” (M3, Mainline Protestant, p. 9), a commitment of sacrificial love (M4, Evangelical Protestant), or a “covenant” (W11, Evangelical Protestant). Leaders understood the particulars of these words in different ways, largely informed by their views of gender roles and divorce.

**Gender roles.** When discussing religious view of marriage, leaders often mentioned their understanding of gender roles, either understanding marriage as a partnership of equals (i.e., egalitarianism) or as sacrificial leadership and submission (i.e., complementarianism). While leaders rarely used these terms, their understanding of marriage often modeled one of these two major beliefs about gender roles within marriage. As a note, those who discussed marriage as a partnership, often discussed their denominational support for same-sex marriage, but talked about gender roles within the confines of heterosexual marriages and thus the following examples provided will be from religious leader’s views within heterosexual marriages.

Most Evangelical Protestant leaders discussed marriages from a commitment of sacrificial love where husbands are to lead their wives with sacrificial love and women are called to submit to and respect this leadership.
Within this understanding of marriage, each partner has a role based upon their gender (male leadership, female submission) that is meant to be acted out within marriages. One male, Evangelical Protestant leader elaborated on the different “jobs” within marriages for men and women:

[As a husband] your job is not to demand that your wife is submissive or follows your lead. Your job as told by scripture is to live such a sacrificial life that you are laying down your life for your wife that she would then want to follow your lead because you are leading by example and you are leading by being a sacrificial servant to her.” (M15, p. 16)

These roles define power and decision-making differently to each person based upon gender as the husband leads and the wife follows. Leaders noted that these roles were designed and created by God to foster healthy marriages. Some religious leaders discussed how when these roles are ignored, it may make it more difficult for each to play their roles and may be part of the reason for conflicts within marriages:

It’s very complex, that’s the other thing. It’s not as simple as it sounds, and often are you dealing, not only with the sin of a couple, but they don’t understand what marriage is all about and what their roles are and their roles are kind of disrespected, they’re ignored. (M6, Evangelical Protestant, p. 9)

Thus, some leaders linked conflict in marriages to a misunderstanding or a denial of these more traditional gender roles. From this perspective, one religious leader shared how his first response when couples seek counsel due to conflict or
violence is to explore their view of gender roles. While some religious leaders may hold this view, I feel it is important to raise a concern about how this belief may be used by the perpetrator to blame their partner. Indeed, the view that roles are the root of violence may be used as a tool by perpetrators to blame victims for the abuse due to a “lack of submission” in their role. A few leaders raised this concern as well by discussing how messages of submission can be used in harmful ways, especially in how a husband may use this language to affirm their role of power in making decisions and perhaps using violence to encourage his wife’s submission. A male religious leader from a Black Protestant congregation shared how messages of submission may justify violence and discussed how scriptures about love in marriages counteracts a justification of violence based on roles:

A lot of times in our faith tradition, you know, a lot of men quote that scripture that talks about wives supposed to submit to their husbands…You're supposed to listen to me. You supposed to be…I'm the person in charge. But the back part of that scripture says that husbands are commanded to love their wives. Well if you are commanded to love your wife, you could never, ever, ever, ever abuse them or violate them. That's not love. And that is the greatest commandment, to love. (M20, p. 10)

As discussed by this religious leader and others, the language of submission and headship may be used and distorted by perpetrators to blame victims for causing them to respond in controlling ways when viewing the roles of headship and submission together.
Other leaders noted that the language of submission and headship may be harmful if not discussed within a frame of what some leaders call “mutual submission.” Some religious leaders understood roles within marriage as playing a small part in a larger picture of mutual care and service to one another. One female leader from a Mainline Protestant congregation described how her view of marriage is informed by similar passages to others who talk about gender roles, but note that the verse preceding the commonly quoted verses in support of more traditional gender roles notes the importance of mutual submission:

You're vowing and promising to cherish and protect and to be mutual partners… interpretations of the headship passages in Galatians and stuff like that, I mean there you just look at what is the topic sentence of the paragraph. The topic sentence at the beginning of the paragraph is, submit yourselves to one another out of reverence for Christ. So that's mutual submission, you know. It's not the woman submitting to the husband, it's mutual submission. And then you read the whole rest of the thing and the light of it being mutual…we submit to one another. In other words, we don't approach someone…we don't approach anyone, but… and most particularly an intimate partner, with the idea of how can I win. You know, it's like, well let’s be looking…out for the good of the other. (W18, p. 15)

For these leaders, gender roles are understood within the context of mutual submission first, where partners are looking out for the common good of the other over themselves. So while some leaders may believe in more traditional or
complementarian gender roles, they understood these roles as each couple mutually submitted to one another first as servants. While there were still decision-making and role differences, the call to submission was the lens through which both genders were called to live their roles, seeking God’s best and what is best for the other partner above themselves.

Many religious leaders from more liberal congregations shared that there are no prescribed gender roles within marriage. Leaders understood marriage as a partnership where partners decide on tasks or roles as a result of their giftedness. For instance, a male leader of a Black Protestant congregation discussed how this mutual submission may mean that while each person loves sacrificially and non-violently, the pastor of his congregation is clear that roles are divided based on giftedness, not gender; sharing how in his own marriage:

His wife manages their financial affairs and he says, ya know, “I’m grateful for my wife, she handles all that and I trust her implicitly. I’ve given her every single paycheck I’ve ever earned.” And ya know, those types of things. He’s like, “But you know what, it’s whatever works for you. Don’t mess up what I’ve got goin on here, this works for me. You find out what works for you. You handle finances better? Then that’s all you.” (M9, p. 15)

Another male leader in a multicultural, Mainline Protestant congregation referenced a verse in Galatians to note that in his view, there is no distinction between men and women and that gender roles are negotiated with both partners leading together with respect and responsibility:
Male and female, God created as equal. I don’t believe in any of this being submissive to the husband, this is a partnership, and then the partnership people, those persons based upon their own giftedness will determine how they live out that marriage in terms of who does what and when. Certainly society has shaped us to a great degree, but you would never hear me say, “Men you have your role by God and you’re the head of your family.” Yeah, you’re the head of your family if you walk with your spouse and it’s one of mutual respect and mutual obligation, but a female being lesser, no. (M7, p. 8)

Leaders discussed how marriage is a partnership and not a contract with set roles and responsibilities and thus, partners explore what works for their relationship within their giftedness. From this perspective, marriage is not about gender roles, but about working together towards common goals with mutual responsibility and ownership.

Religious leaders discussed gender roles from these two perspectives, highlighting how an understanding of marriage may be used as a justification for abuse or may also be used to counteract and denounce abuse. Religious leaders discussed the importance of teaching about marriage and the roles within marriage, whether complementarian or egalitarian, as a key piece of their response to IPV as leaders emphasized the importance of pre-marital and marital counseling for their congregation members. For one Evangelical Protestant leader, he felt it was particularly important to address gender roles in pre-marital and
marriage counseling in order to encourage roles that are focused on love and sacrifice, not justifying violence:

   And I do teach that in my pre-marital and in marriage counseling…the husband as taking the lead, but I quickly emphasize what Paul says in Ephesians that the husband plays the role that Christ played in laying down his life for his wife. And I said…I’d like to teach and tell everyone your job is not to demand that your wife is submissive or follows your lead--your job as told by Scripture is to live such a sacrificial life that you are laying down your life for your wife that she would then want to follow your lead because you are leading by example and you are leading by being a sacrificial servant to her. (M15, p. 15-16)

Another leader shared how her view of marriage as equal and a partnership informed her use of egalitarian premarital resources: “the premarital resources I use, are definitely set so that egalitarian would be the more preferred and I know couples work things out in differently in different ways but I think ‘partnership’ and not so much a ‘contract.’” (W14, MP, p. 9). These views of gender roles were discussed in their pre-marital and marriage counseling and are particularly important when considering issues of power and of safety within marriages and may also have implications for religious views of divorce.

Divorce. Religious leaders shared beliefs about how IPV violated marriage vows and was thus a justified reason for the end of the relationship (e.g., IPV as form of abandonment), while others shared divorce as a last resort and expressed goals of saving the relationship as a top priority. For many religious
leaders, they viewed violence as breaking a marriage vow to love the other
person. One male leader from a Mainline Protestant congregation described his
view of marriage as a vow that can be “broken, and it can be shattered and so it
can’t be reclaimed and you have to move on to a new relationship and God gives
you grace” (M16, p. 9). Implied in his response was that abuse is one way a
person breaks a marriage vow and that in light of the vow of marriage being
broken and the deep impact of abuse, this pastor felt that God supported
separation or divorce from an abusive partner. Others viewed violence within
marriages similarly, relating it to scriptures and religious beliefs about one spouse
abandoning the other and thus viewed IPV was a Biblically supported grounds for
divorce. A male leader from an Evangelical Protestant who shared the view that
IPV was abandonment noted how his belief encouraged him to support wives
seeking safety through separation or divorce:

Separate from him because your safety is at risk. Irrespective of—of
whether he means to do this or not, you’ve got a responsibility to care for
yourself and keep yourself alive. And, so, so that’s not—God’s not going
to be upset if you leave your husband because, you’re seeking safety
‘cause I would argue that he’s already left her, in the marriage, and so he’s
abandoned the marriage and there’s no divorce issues or theological issues
left on the table. He took care of that already. (M12, p. 8)

Thus, for many religious leaders violence was a violation of their understanding
of marriage and thus, grounds for divorce. Leaders who held this perspective
often prioritized the safety of the survivor in their response. Perhaps for these
leaders, this belief of divorce allowed them to prioritize survivor safety because the question about saving the marriage or reconciliation was a potential option that the survivor may choose later on, but not a pressing theological belief, question, or tension.

Linked to leader’s understanding of violence, participants noted that sometimes violence was a line that was crossed, especially when the violence was physical, which justified or led to the end of the relationship. Perhaps linked to the gradation of violence discussed within the definition and description section, some religious leaders viewed physical violence as the line at which divorce or separation was justified within the context of IPV. While some held this view about IPV and divorce, other leaders expressed frustration over divorce being justified in all forms of violence in marriage (i.e., “lower” forms of violence on the gradation such as emotional or verbal abuse). Indeed, some leaders felt that physical violence justified divorce, but that other forms of IPV may be able to be worked through to reach the goal of reconciliation. One male, Evangelical Protestant leader who in his response to IPV often encouraged reconciliation expressed frustration about how he often does not hear about violence until after they have decided to separate. This leader expressed a hesitancy to support couples who chose to separate or divorce because he questioned whether or not couples had simply given up on each other, however when there was physical abuse and neglect he supported divorce:

Certainly that is a broad characteristic of what could qualify so I want to make sure that it’s not just two people that can’t forgive. Two people who
can’t learn how to communicate. Two people that can’t…you know…learn how to become at better at loving each other. Divorce has become far too easy and people give up far too quickly and there is a much better outcome if the two would actually learn to grow toward intimacy in a good, positive way and learn communication skills and learn to love one another…however there are certain people that reach a point in their marriage where the one spouse is just no longer invested in the relationship and they are doing neglectful, abusive…all the way up to physical abuse and therefore I support divorce at that point. (M15, p. 11)

Others also hoped for the restoration of relationships, but when both couples desire it and across time, “so ultimately I don’t think it’s about ‘saving’ the relationship. I mean that can, it can happen and if both want it to happen, I don’t think it’s the first goal” (W1, Mainline Protestant, p. 16). Leaders varied in their perspectives of divorce, which related to their views of the role of forgiveness and reconciliation within the Christian faith as well as within marriage.

**Forgiveness.** Interwoven with religious beliefs of marriage and divorce, another prominent religious belief explored in the present study was forgiveness. Forgiveness was a particularly interesting religious belief because it often arose organically in my interviews with religious leaders as they discussed other religious beliefs. It seemed forgiveness was a key religious belief to leaders when sharing their understanding and response to IPV. Leaders discussed religious beliefs about what forgiveness entails and the impact of forgiveness on the survivor. Forgiveness was most often described as a process, where survivors
may continue to return to the act of forgiveness. One female leader from a Mainline Protestant congregation likened forgiveness to rebirth, she described forgiveness as a process of leaving behind what is dead or hurtful to move toward life:

Forgiveness isn’t a once and for all thing, being reborn is not a once and for all thing. It is a continual process where we are, we are being born into new life and it’s more like an onion, peeling off the layers of that which doesn’t serve… is dried out, is causing damage. (W5, p. 11)

From this perspective, forgiveness was seen as a continual choice and even described as a daily choice acknowledging the past and moving forward towards something new: “I also stress that it’s a process. It isn’t something that happens once and for all, forever. You know often we find ourselves having to revisit that process again and again with somebody” (W2, Mainline Protestant, p. 12). For this religious leader and others, forgiveness happened over time and was often a process that reoccurred and resurfaced as time progressed.

Some religious leaders acknowledged how survivors may have a difficult time forgiving or may never forgive the perpetrator. A male pastor in a Black Protestant congregation shared his perspective on forgiveness as his mother was abused by his father and never forgave his father. This leader shared his own belief that Christians are called to forgive, but also acknowledges that his mother was never able to forgive his abusive father. Thus his personal exposure to abuse not only informed his understanding of abuse, but also his understanding that survivors may not feel they can forgive (M20). Others discuss how forgiveness
may take time, but it also may not happen as IPV is a deep hurt and may not be a part of someone’s path:

I think it’s super complicated, and I think I don’t think forgiveness always happens immediately and I suspect it sometimes not always happen while we [are] still in certain places while we’re still alive, I think- it varies, some people feel very free when they get to a place where they are able to forgive someone who was violent against them was hurtful towards them and other people are never going to get to that place, not that and ultimately it’s inner self, …but I mean it’s a different path for everyone. I don’t think you must forgive the person who just did really bad things towards you, like maybe someday, maybe not someday. (W14, Mainline Protestant, p. 10-11)

Leaders understood that forgiveness was not always something that survivors were ready to discuss or to do and that they may never reach a place of forgiveness, which proved problematic within some leaders view of forgiveness that tightly linked forgiving others with one’s own salvation and well-being.

Religious leaders highlighted forgiveness as an important step to take in order to release bitterness and move forward. Many religious leaders placed an importance on forgiving the perpetrator because of the impact unforgiveness has on the person who has been harmed:

Forgiveness is letting go of the desire to hold something against someone. That’s kind of one simple thing…there’s that sort of Jewish midrash that says…“holding a grudge is like taking a spoonful of poison every day
hoping your enemy will get sick.” So it’s that idea that your hold onto something so tightly thinking you’re hurting the other person, but you actually end up hurting yourself…you know, building a wall. (W2, Mainline Protestant, p. 12)

From this perspective, forgiveness was seen as healing for the survivor because not forgiving is seen as producing bitterness. Religious leaders discussed how withholding forgiveness had a great impact on survivors: “If you withhold forgiveness it has consequences in your emotional and social and even in your physical wellbeing…I don’t think it’s about forgetting, and I don’t think it’s about trusting someone in the same way you once did” (M16, Mainline Protestant, p. 10). Leaders viewed forgiveness as healing and this was related to their understanding of what forgiveness was as expressed by this male Mainline Protestant leader:

I think it is something necessary for healing. I mean if you withhold forgiveness it has consequences in your emotional and social and even in your physical wellbeing…I don’t think it’s about forgetting, and I don’t think it’s about trusting someone in the same way you once did, but it is nonetheless, say, even if I can’t love you, I know God does. And wishing that person well and not trying to…harm them or wish them harm. (M16, p. 10)

These leaders placed a high emphasis on forgiveness because it would be healing for the survivor not for the good of the situation or of the perpetrator. While this perspective may be empowering for survivors because the focus is on their own
process and healing, from my perspective as an advocate, researcher, and Christian, it may also be disempowering if survivors feel they are unable to forgive. For some survivors, the step of forgiveness may not feel safe or healing and thus, this view of forgiveness may not be comforting or fit within their experience.

Other leaders expressed a belief that forgiveness is important because of the forgiveness that God has given humankind. From this perspective, forgiveness is seen as a work of God, where people are called to forgive because God has forgiven them. Leaders referenced beliefs about forgiveness such as the importance of forgiving because the Lord forgave them or if an individual doesn’t forgive, they won’t be forgiven, demonstrated in this quote by a male religious leader in a Black Protestant congregation:

I believe that God calls us to forgive and I…it's hard and that's why I think God challenges us. And it humbles me because I recognize that if I don't [forgive], then I won't be [forgiven] and I ain't always been perfect. I know I make mistakes, not always intentional. It's never intentional and so how can I not forgive people when others have forgiven me. (M20, p. 12)

Another male leader from an Evangelical Protestant congregation described his understanding of forgiveness as being a reflection or “echo” of God’s forgiveness of each person, citing a phrase from the Lord’s Prayer in scripture:

When you hear statements like, “forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us”—that’s really not conditional. “You
forgive us \emph{because} we forgive those people.” When you look at the grammar of the Greek, it’s the other way around. It is…\emph{because} you forgive us, we can forgive others. And so I think that the core there is to help touch, in that person’s life who’s struggling with forgiveness, have them understand that God is the—the agent of forgiveness and you’re an agent of— the \emph{echo} of that. (M12, p. 20)

Within this frame, forgiveness is possible only because of God’s forgiveness for each person and thus, forgiveness is not an act of the individual, but of God. For many religious leaders, this view of forgiveness informed their emphasis on forgiveness as crucial to their faith as well as to their salvation because they were called to forgive as they had been forgiven. However, leaders also discussed how this view may be complicated for survivors as it may foster further shame if survivors do not feel as though they are ready or want to forgive the perpetrator. Survivors may feel shame or like they are a “bad Christian” if they feel unable to forgive. While some survivors may be comforted by the idea of God’s forgiveness being the forgiveness they offer to perpetrators, others may not find this belief helpful or true of their understanding of God. Thus, religious leaders may better support survivors through first asking about their own understandings of forgiveness and exploring how they feel best able to heal and make a choice about how, if at all, to offer forgiveness.

Throughout these discussions of forgiveness, religious leaders implied a common harmful ideology of forgiveness as forgetting the abuse. This belief was discussed by religious leaders as encouraging forgiveness too quickly though
using scripture about the importance of forgiving given God’s forgiveness of humankind to support forgetting the abuse and the restoration of the relationship with the abusive partner. While no religious leaders interviewed in the present study directly stated a belief that forgiveness is forgetting, at times within the interviews religious leaders talked about forgiveness in ways that had underlying messages of forgetting the abuse:

Forgiveness means that you don’t owe me anything and that I don’t harbor ill will against you. It doesn’t mean that I’m going to put myself in a dangerous position again. Ya know, biblical forgiveness teaches us that you respond to the person like it never happened before, but not in a way, of course, that whatever set you up for, for, for violence. (M09, Black Protestant, p. 16)

In some ways, this view of forgiveness seems to wipe away and forget abuse to respond to the person as if it never happened. Forgetting the abuse may be particularly harmful because of recidivism rates and may also reinforce the “holy hush” surrounding abuse that continues to keep violence hidden and shameful. Thus, while leaders discussed forgiveness as a process or as releasing the past, it was difficult to discern the difference between their ideal of forgiveness and the reality of what that forgiveness looks like within the context of IPV and violence.

Many leaders clarified, however, that forgiveness is not forgetting the abuse, emphasizing the importance of acknowledging the abuse and not forgetting what has occurred:
I do not believe forgiving is forgetting, which a lot of people make that mistake. And every sermon that I have preached on forgiveness, I make it a point to say forgiveness does not include forgetting. There are often reasons for us to remember whatever it is that we are forgetting. (W2, Mainline Protestant, p. 13)

Many religious leaders emphasized acknowledging the abuse within the process of forgiveness, which may counteract the “holy hush” within congregations through encouraging perpetrator ownership and accountability for their abusive actions.

Indeed, some leaders emphasized the importance of understanding forgiveness within the context of abuse and the need to see repentance and accountability from the perpetrator. One female leader from a multicultural, Evangelical Protestant congregation noted the importance of looking differently at forgiveness within the context of IPV, acknowledging the dynamics of power and control that need to be accounted for in her response and her counsel to a survivor:

But I am vividly aware of the distorted dynamic when you have domestic violence that there's a…number one on the man's part that there's generally this cycle of ‘oh, I'm so sorry, I'm so sorry, I'm so sorry, you know, just forgive me I'll never do it again’ and then there's a period of calm and then it comes back again. And so that that's a part of just the typical cycle and then I'm also aware of how in the past, in general, women were counseled well you just have to forgive him, or there must be
something you did to bring this on and that that's all a part of this really complex dynamic that…that runs counter to that…just that…our more traditional assumption of the place of repentance and forgiveness in a relationship…That's why I think looking at the power dynamic, seeing it as a power dynamic is really crucial because you just have to say there's something different going on here. (W18, p. 17)

This view was held by other leaders who felt that cycles and dynamics of abuse were particularly important to keep in mind when discussing forgiveness because of the implications these factors have on beliefs about reconciliation, discussed in the following section, and the potential for harm when forgiveness is considered quickly and reconciliation is sought immediately.

*Reconciliation.* While discussing forgiveness, leaders discussed their views of reconciliation, specifically whether or not the restoration of the relationship is a possible goal in forgiveness or if it is a necessary step. Some leaders felt that the restoration of the relationship through accountability and repentance was crucial, while others believed that the patterns of abuse complicated reconciliation and may not be possible or desired by the survivor. Related to views of abuse, forgiveness, and divorce, reconciliation was a particularly complex religious belief and religious leaders discussed it as such.

Reconciliation was described as a goal by some religious leaders. Leaders sought to work with couples in order to restore the relationship through accountability and seeing actions that reflected changed behavior. These leaders often shared about reconciliation being a first step or conversation in their
response to survivors. One male, Evangelical Protestant leader shared a story of a woman who was planning to leave her husband due to abuse and the leader noted how he supported her separating for her immediate safety, but he then “asked her if she had any interest in reconciliation” (M15, p. 10). When the survivor stated that she did not, the leader expressed frustration that he “wasn’t able to follow through with her and him together. She was done” (M15, p. 10). For some leaders, reconciliation was a key consideration when responding to IPV, perhaps because religious leaders may feel a pressure to keep the family intact or may hold religious beliefs about marriage that place such a high emphasis on reconciliation. Indeed, for some religious leaders, reconciliation was much more important and emphasized. A male, Black Protestant leader described how his view of who God is informed his understanding that reconciliation is always possible:

In my mind I’m always hopeful for reconciliation and progress in a relationship, but also understanding the reality that this relationship may be irreparably harmed. And it’s not in my mind, in my theology, for lack of opportunity for healing because I believe that there is no hurt, no pain that God can’t heal. I do believe that depending on the individuals, their relationship with God, their maturity, their commitment to healing and growth anything is possible as long as we deal with reality. (M9, p. 12).

While some religious leaders held a high view of reconciliation, an emphasis on forgiveness and restoration of the relationship as a result of one’s faith or maturity may be used to blame the victim as it may reinforce a belief that if someone is
unable to forgive or if violence is occurring, there is something spiritually wrong with that individual. As an advocate and researcher, it is important to note that such a high importance on reconciliation early on may neglect important changes in behavior or patterns that contribute to abuse and may fail to address the root causes of abuse, continuing to put the survivor in jeopardy of future violence.

For some leaders, their view of forgiveness acknowledged that the restoration of the relationship may not be in the best interest of the survivor: “I am always very careful when I’m talking with people about forgiveness to stress that it may be best for them not to be in relationship with the person they are trying to forgive” (W2, Mainline Protestant, p. 12). Some leaders discussed reconciliation as a possible step of forgiveness, but one that was in light of what a survivor identified as best for herself and as a result of seeing some form of repentance from the perpetrator:

There has to be equality and mutuality in marriage and so it’s not just the women’s responsibility to forgive. It’s her responsibility…to…love herself…as she loves God. And loves others. So I stress more the loving yourself. And…uh…but you’re right—that does come up quite a bit. And, uh…and again, the Bible teaches about reconciliation. That there’s really no forgiveness without some form…of real repentance. (M13, Mainline Protestant, p. 14)

This religious leader from a Mainline Protestant church raised the importance of repentance as a condition for reconciliation. For many religious leaders, reconciliation was an option for survivors and perpetrators, but when both were
willing to reconcile and where the perpetrator demonstrated a change in behavior or a willingness to address actions. One male, Mainline Protestant leader described reconciliation on the high scale of what forgiveness is and acknowledged that change is a requirement:

I think forgiveness is kinda a scale of being able to admit that you’ve done something wrong and going all the way towards kinda a reconciliation. You know, where both people are able to say that they feel forgiven and that they’re trusted enough to say to that person, “I forgive you” and know that’s gonna come back, that that person really feels sorry for what they did but also is able to change their behavior and not do that anymore. (M3, p. 13)

Many religious leaders saw reconciliation as an option to survivors, but not a requirement or as a necessary component of forgiveness. These differing views on reconciliation may lead to different strategies to respond to IPV and different goals that religious leaders encourage survivors of IPV to reach as discussed in the following section on religious leaders’ views of their role.

Overall, religious beliefs informed religious leader’s understanding, perspectives, and response to IPV. For instance, religious beliefs about justice motivated religious leaders to respond to the tensions they face around navigating forgiveness with survivors and perpetrators. Throughout, participants expressed the ways that religious beliefs can be both helpful and harmful to survivors of IPV. Interestingly, leaders also shared how they utilized other religious beliefs about worth and the character of God (see section on Worth and God’s Image) to
counteract these harmful beliefs and encouraged empowering or survivor-centered responses that aligned with their religious beliefs or understanding of God. It is clear that religious beliefs provided religious leaders with a variety of perspectives that when related to their response to IPV, developed both tensions and opportunities to respond in their role as religious leaders.

**Role of Leader**

Religious leaders discussed how their understanding of their role as a leader of the congregation shaped the strategies that they used to respond to IPV. Religious leaders described their role as supporting or walking alongside individuals and couples that sought help and felt that in their role as a leader, they were invited into people’s lives. Their view of their role prompted questions about how being invited into people’s lives as a leader comes with privilege and power. Furthermore, religious leaders reflected on how their role impacted them in unique ways as they entered into difficult, at times violent, situations when responding to IPV.

**Supportive.** Many religious leaders described their role primarily as a support person who provided a safe space. Religious leaders felt they supported couples or individuals experiencing IPV through listening, asking questions, and walking alongside them. Religious leaders emphasized the importance of being supportive through hearing people out, both for survivors and perpetrators. Some religious leaders felt the responsibility to only hear and speak with the survivor, while others sought to hear each person’s perspective. When leaders sought to hear both sides, leaders took one of two approaches. Some leaders discussed the
importance of speaking to each person separately, while others thought it best to discuss the abuse with the couple jointly. The religious leaders who discussed with the couple together often put a high emphasis on reconciliation as a goal of their response to IPV. In one particular instance, a male, Evangelical Protestant religious leader recounted a situation of IPV where he wanted to get the couple together to discuss the abuse and the possibility of reconciliation after the two had separated for safety reasons. The husband met with the pastor and the wife met regularly with counselors; the religious leader greatly encouraged bringing the couple together to work towards reconciliation:

I…pressed for reconciliation—let’s bring the two together—I think this can really work. The other counselors were very against that idea and felt that, “no, that’s too soon” or whatever…And they felt that she had taken it for so long that they really wanted to spend more time kind of building her up. So I met and tried to press that we get some kind of…they don’t have to live together…let’s just get some marriage counseling going…let’s get some conversation going, but the other side never had an interest. (M15, p. 13-14)

For this religious leader, he viewed his role as supportive through encouraging the couple towards reconciliation. While not all leaders desired to talk to both individuals in the partnership together when responding to an IPV situation, many discussed a desire to speak with both individuals, especially if they were both presently members of the congregation.
Leaders discussed how their role may include walking alongside both survivors and perpetrators through pastoral counseling or accountability respectively, but quickly noted the importance of referring out individuals to trained professionals. As leaders discussed their role in supporting individuals, religious leaders often clarified that their role was not to be a counselor, but to be a support and provide referrals. Leaders shared stories about referring survivors and perpetrators to more professional services within their response to IPV in their congregations. One female leader from a Mainline Protestant congregation reflected this when she discussed her role as a pastor:

I think I am a support person but I am a firm believer in refer, refer, refer. Like I am not a licensed counselor, I am not a doctor and so I can accompany people and I can pray with them and walk with them as a pastor, but I am not the person who can be the medical or clinical professional in those instances. (W14, p. 7-8)

Religious leaders were clear to separate their role from those of counselors or clinicians. While many noted that their role was to provide pastoral or lay counseling, religious leaders recognized the need and importance to refer both survivors and perpetrators to more specialized and trained counselors.

**Invited into people’s lives.** In their role as religious leaders, participants who were pastors often felt their position created space for people seeking advice or counsel. Pastors recognized they may be invited into “hard” spaces as a result of their role within the congregation. Pastors shared how in their role, people come to them for advice and counsel:
You know, as a pastor we’re invited into people’s lives in a different way than most people are. And so, I hear a lot, I see a lot, I do counseling if somebody is beginning to feel relationship stress or dissatisfaction, or things like that. (W2, Mainline Protestant, p. 7)

At times this looked like survivors seeking help and other times religious leaders shared how members of their congregation shared their concern with the pastor about another member experiencing IPV. Religious leaders viewed these situations differently, some emphasized the importance of empowerment and confidentiality while others preferred to confront the abuse.

For some religious leaders, being invited into people’s lives fostered an awareness of power. Religious leaders reflected on their role as a leader and recognized how the leadership position comes with power:

I don't want to like look at somebody’s relationship and go, “Hmmm that seems like a really a really weird power imbalance.” And walk up to somebody and go, “[name of person], are you ok in your marriage?” You know I mean that doesn’t seem... that seems like misusing my power, my own power…” (W1, Mainline Protestant, p. 22)

Religious leaders expressed a tension around how to respond to IPV and manage the power that the felt came with their role. Some religious leaders from Mainline Protestant congregations expressed tensions around power and being empowering because they were mandated reporters. Leaders expressed a difficulty in being mandated to report abuse, while also wanting to respect confidentiality and the survivor’s needs. One female leader of a Mainline Protestant congregation shared
how she struggled with knowing how to best handle mandated reporting between adults and had utilized domestic violence shelters as a resource to help answer this question:

I mean, most clergy understand that we’re mandated reporters…we like to think it’s sort of crystal clear and it just isn’t when it comes to adults.

Having said that, I mean there are times in which it would be very clear that you would be a mandated reporter…if I think somebody is in danger of harming themselves or somebody else, I understand that I am a mandated reporter. When somebody is a little afraid of being harmed, or isn’t afraid and should be, you know, that’s where it becomes a gray area.

So…but…over the years I’ve found a lot of help. So again I think, I’ve always found DV shelters to be super helpful…when I have a question about that kind of thing… they are always great if you call and say, “I’m not sure what to do in this situation.” They’re usually really great about walking you through some things. (W2, p. 16)

Leaders shared stories of working to find the balance with being empowering towards survivors while also acting in ways that aligned with their values and the requirements of their role. Leaders mentioned mentors and others who are working directly with violence against women as helpful resources. It may be that connections with organizations addressing IPV or violence against women may increase religious leader’s knowledge of how to respond to violence and may provide them with helpful resources as well. However, as will be discussed later, the connections that religious leaders have with organizations addressing violence
against women are tangential, charitable, or inconsistent. These partnerships could potentially be helpful in equipping religious leaders to respond to IPV in ways that support best-practices.

Although religious leaders recognized they were invited into people’s lives, some leaders were hesitant to directly address allegations of abuse from others or behaviors that appeared abusive, while others were comfortable with addressing allegations of violence directly. One male pastor from an Evangelical background discussed how when others shared potential abuse, he sought out information in order to confront the couple. For instance, this religious leader shared a story of how a congregation member raised concern about abuse in another member’s relationship and he asked the following two questions:

> Number one, how certain are you? And number two, can I somehow let this other person as I approach this other person, can I let them know you have reported this to me? If you want me to keep you out I will try to pursue on my own. (M15, p. 9)

This leader believed it was best to respond to the information directly, while others expressed a desire to keep an eye out for signs on their own even after an individual shared concerns about potential abuse. Leaders discussed how in order to not abuse their role, they may ask some basic questions to give someone an opportunity to share, but did not feel comfortable directly asking about the abuse itself.

Some religious leaders from all religious traditions in the present study discussed how leaders used their role as a pastor to directly address or raise
questions about experiences of IPV. For instance, religious leaders discussed pre-marital counseling as an arena where they asked explicitly about whether either partner had previously experienced violence and explored present behaviors. Religious leaders viewed pre-marital counseling as a time to explore couple’s communication, anger coping skills, and possible abusive tendencies or experiences and encouraged couples to address these issues. This strategy may be a form of prevention because religious leaders are working with couples to identify and then work through potential contributors or causes of IPV. One female religious leader from a Mainline Protestant congregation reflected on how if harmful behaviors or patterns do not change between the couple before their wedding, she will not marry them and even sets up guidelines and steps to address these behaviors:

So in terms of intimate partner violence, if I thought a couple should not get married because they were violent towards each other in their language or in their behaviors during counseling, I would talk to them about that and I would say I have great concerns for your marriage and I will only marry you on the condition that you go to a therapist and that I can communicate with the therapist and that he/she will tell me that you are working this out. I will refuse to do a wedding if I don’t think it’s appropriate behavior that I see or that I hear about. (W17, p. 15)

In this instance, this religious leader encouraged couples to seek outside counseling and continued to hold the couple accountable through checking in with the therapist. Another female, Mainline Protestant leader viewed her role as
raising questions, but not directly intervening in the situation itself, “I feel like it’s my job to shed light on everything that I can. And then let two adults make a decision about what they are gonna do” (W02, p. 8). Religious leaders agreed in a need to respond to IPV, but differed in their understanding and response of what support looked like perhaps balancing privacy of the relationship with how involved they became in the couple’s relationship.

**Impact of role on leader.** As leaders discussed their role, they noted different ways that their role impacted them and their ability to respond to IPV. One female, Mainline Protestant leader noted how when she placed her robe on, it was viewed as a separation between her as a person and her as a pastor. This is particularly interesting given she shared her own story of being a survivor of IPV in front of the congregation in the hope that others would come forward. After sharing her story, there was complete silence from the congregation because no one came forward or acknowledged her story. She expressed that it felt like people didn’t know what to do with that information because she showed her humanity and humanness and people have a hard time with that in their pastor who is in some ways viewed as “other,” perfect or holier:

I struggle sometimes with just being a pastor, having completed seminary and taking on that role, people don’t see me as a human being anymore. They see me as someone who has resolved those issues. And that is one of the reasons I took the risk and preached a sermon on myself as a survivor of domestic and partner violence…I think one-on-one I’m a very
approachable person, but when I put on that robe and stand up on the
pulpit, it seems to put a barrier between me and people. (W05, p. 12-13)

In revealing her own humanness and experience with IPV, she became more
aware of how people may view her role as holy and not approach her because of
their discomfort with her holiness as a pastor. This may be a symptom of the
“holy hush,” where congregation members may not know how to respond to a
disclosure of abuse or may not feel comfortable with the humanness of their
pastor who they view as holy and thus, not feel comfortable responding to her
personal story of IPV or may pastors as having “resolved” all their issues and are
unapproachable. Regardless of the reason, such silence following a disclosure
may perpetuate a “holy hush” around IPV and continue to keep violence between
partners hidden and undisclosed.

Other leaders talked about how their experiences in responding to IPV had
impacted them personally on an emotional level. The burden that leaders took on
in hearing stories of IPV was expressed in how they reflected on difficult cases
and situations where they responded to IPV. One male leader from a Mainline
Protestant congregation shared about how he was personally emotionally hurt
from an experience counseling a couple because the couple treated him as the
common enemy and acted aggressively toward him. He reflected on how this
experience traumatized him and “poisoned his well” as it impacted him in his
feelings of safety and his ability to connect with his own partner (M13, P. 16).

Another male leader from an Evangelical Protestant congregation described an
experience where in counseling a woman experiencing emotional and sexual
abuse “the subject matter was…very graphic and, uhm…uhm…borderline inappropriate” (M12, p. 13). This leader struggled to talk about this instance as he stuttered and paused frequently recounting how it was difficult to hear such graphic information. These leaders and others expressed how these stories and experiences still deeply impacted them and have stayed with them over the years. It seems that they viewed these impacts on themselves as part of their role, but nevertheless were emotionally difficult and taxing as well.

**Response to IPV**

Throughout the results section, there are already examples of how religious leaders described the ways they had responded to IPV. Of the 20 participants in the present study, eight leaders had never responded to an instance of IPV directly, while others shared a wealth of experience. Regardless of the opportunity to respond to IPV, leaders discussed how they viewed their role in responding as a religious leader. Leaders described their strategies to respond to IPV and the tensions and struggles that arose when an instance of IPV came to their attention. Some leaders saw their role as to confront abuse or to follow established protocols, while others responded with prayer or through reaching out for resources and support from others. Within their response to IPV, religious leaders weaved in the ways religious beliefs and their understanding of abuse informed their view of their role as responders and will be discussed throughout.

**Wary of boundaries.** Religious leaders expressed a tension about confronting abuse or getting involved in situations of IPV, which was related to how leaders discussed being wary about respecting people’s privacy and
confidentiality. Especially when religious leaders heard about IPV secondhand, they expressed a tension about whether or not to address the couple or individual. Linked to their view of their role, religious leaders either followed up on the secondhand account or decided to keep an eye out and watch for further warning signs that they could follow up on. One male religious leader of a Mainline Protestant congregation stated, “I mean there’s confidences that you kinda have to be respectful of and so I don't know. I just try to be aware of it myself so that I can watch for it and offer something at the appropriate time I guess if it comes up” (M3, p. 7). When leaders saw potentially abusive behaviors between couples, they once again expressed a tension about whether or not to address the behaviors with the couple. For example, one religious leader shared a story about how in a leadership meeting, she became aware of a woman in her congregation who was showing up to church with physical injuries perhaps due a pre-existing medical condition. However, another leader inquired about the potential of abuse and recounted other times she had heard of the couple using harsh language with each other. The religious leader in the present study noted how she appreciate how this other staff member was aware of IPV, but that they decided to not address the potential violence at this time:

She was on top of it, like wait a minute, you know, do we need to be thinking about…the possibility of domestic violence here. And just the fact that she raised it then, [another pastors is] going to be just watching and keeping an eye out. (W18, MP, p. 14)
While these leaders acknowledged or saw potential patterns of abuse, they chose not to inquire about potential abuse, possibly out of fear of offending the couple or not knowing how to best address these patterns. Interestingly, leaders rarely shared instances outside of premarital counseling or where a partner shared the abuse with them where they addressed the situation directly. Perhaps a fear of addressing abuse comes from the “holy hush” of IPV within congregations as such questions are seen as private or too personal to be addressed by a religious leader. This belief may contribute to a view that one’s marriage and issues within marriage are private and discourage survivors from seeking help or others outside of the relationship from asking about the abuse. Most religious leaders waited for survivors to disclose abuse or for opportunities like marital counseling to raise such concerns.

**Struggles and tensions.** Religious leaders shared different factors that they weighed, considered, and struggled with when responding to IPV. These factors included a tension around defining the abuse and determining their response, their struggle between being empowering and encouraging safety, and tensions around supporting perpetrators.

Religious leaders discussed their struggle with defining the abuse and determining the type of response needed within certain forms of abuse. Leaders discussed keeping an eye out for potentially abusive situations, but also shared tensions about their response to these behaviors not being dictated by the severity of the abuse. Linked to the idea of physical abuse crossing a line or a gradation of violence, when physical violence was noted, leaders often emphasized the
importance of direct action and accountability. One Evangelical Protestant religious leader shared how when he saw a hint of physical violence, he addressed it immediately: “If we’re in marriage counseling with a couple and they’re missed on getting along, often if I see a clue that there’s any kind of clue that there’s physical violence, I will ask ‘Have you touched her? Have you touched him?’” (M06, p. 8). This leader was quick to address physical violence and also emphasized how when he sees or hears of violence, “there’s going to be some accountability on the pastoral side” (M06, p. 16). However when verbal or emotional abuse occurred, leaders often discussed how they were not sure how to best respond or if they should report these acts. As religious leaders recounted stories of abuse, they often used the word “just” to qualify the abuse if it was “just” verbal or emotional. Some leaders felt that some acts of violence that were a single time or smaller actions were more forgivable or perhaps something that couples could work through. One male, Evangelical Protestant religious leader noted how when working with a couple, the husband met with the religious leader and the wife met with some crisis counselors. As the religious leader pressed for reconciliation, he expressed frustration over the counselor’s perspective that it was too soon, implying that the instance of violence may not have been so severe that it would be too soon to address:

The other counselors were very against that idea and felt that, ‘no, that’s too soon’ or whatever. I was not as convinced that the abuse had been actually hands on physical. He threw an empty pop bottle at her. That was the worst offense I ever heard… but he was verbally abusive (M15, p. 13)
Within this example, the religious leader seemingly puts violence on a spectrum, implying that it was not “too soon” to address the verbal abuse because the physical violence was episodic. Such an approach may in fact miss the warning signs of abuse that may come out in public such as verbal aggression or may fail to address “lower” forms of violence that may build over time into physical violence. This gradation of violence may shape the response of religious leaders as they make value judgments on what is “enough” evidence or serious enough acts to require a response.

These presumed singular or episodic acts of violence were often linked to different personal/environmental factors such as unemployment, drinking, or mental illness and this link may determine a different response to consistent abuse or violence that’s not connected to external factors:

More often it’s the kind of thing where it's more episodic, you know, connected with bouts of depression or drinking. I mean I'm thinking of one particular woman in the congregation who on the occasions when her husband has gotten…been unemployed…and this is a professional couple but if he's unemployed and then begins to drink then there is occasional…he'll explode…and mostly shouting and hollering and that kind of stuff. So I've tried to direct her to resources and things like that, but then it seems like it settles down. (W18, Mainline Protestant, p. 14)

When asked what resources she connected the survivor to, she mentioned a counselor in their congregation and then reflected on how a domestic violence hotline did not seem like an appropriate response, perhaps due to the episodic
nature of the abuse: “…in that situation it really didn't seem like I needed to be
giving her a domestic violence hotline or anything like that” (W18, p. 14). The
episodic nature of physical violence may contribute to the downplaying of
violence or may ignore other behaviors that are violent within the relationship.
Through not supplying the woman with domestic violence resources, the pastor
seemingly decided what services did not apply to the survivor, perhaps out of fear
of overstepping her role as religious leader or of offending the woman. Leaders
experienced a tension about how to respond to the severity and type of violence
and make judgment calls on when different responses were or were not
appropriate.

Leaders also experienced a tension between their own desire for the
survivor to leave and their role to support survivors regardless of whether or not
they chose to leave. Leaders felt this tension and often responded with an
acknowledgement that language dictating how the survivor should respond was
not empowering and instead, returned to messages of worth and value:

And you can’t make people leave. I mean I learned that early on. And then
you’re just controlling her in another way. You know instead of having the
husband control her, now you are controlling her. Saying, “You have to
get out of there!” That’s not empowering her either. So I think like it’s a
way of, I mean I hope that our love language at church can be empowering
to people to say, “I am worthy of more.” You know? “I do deserve
something different.” (W1, Mainline Protestant, p. 18)
Leaders experienced the tensions of their own desires for the survivor to leave and expressed the importance of safety, while also prioritizing the agenda and desires of the survivor above their own perspectives.

Not only did religious leaders discuss tensions around supporting survivors, they also expressed tensions about interactions with and support for perpetrators. Leaders expressed a struggle in their role as they sought to hear both sides and support both people within the congregation, while also prioritizing the community as one of safety and healing. Leaders expressed how in their role, they listened and attempted to create safe space through negotiating boundaries of time each person spends in the congregation, however religious leaders also expressed a need to refer out as they felt it may be beyond the scope of their role to support both parties in the conflict. When asked about her response and experience with perpetrators, one female, Mainline Protestant leader expressed the tension she felt:

That’s hard to think about right? I mean quite frankly how do you, I mean it’s a space issue sometimes right? And how do you create a space that’s going to be safe for everyone? But that’s a really good question, I mean like I am sitting down with someone who is clearly the perpetrator, how do you handle that? That’s a really good question. And I don’t know the perfect…the clear answer in my head I think - there’s listening that happens…again “refer refer refer” in my little head. (W14, p. 12)

While some leaders expressed the need to refer perpetrators to professional resources and counselors as they felt it was beyond their role, others leaders took
on this role themselves, which will be discussed in further depth in a section on accountability. Regardless of the type of role religious leaders played, they experienced a tension and struggle on how to best support couples experiencing IPV, especially given the type of abuse and their interactions with each of the partners involved.

**Confront.** Leaders described the tension they felt between wanting to respect the privacy of individuals, while also assisting those who may be in need or experiencing abuse. Some religious leaders responded to instances or inquiries of violence through being confrontational or calling out the violence directly. One context where most leaders felt they could address these abusive behaviors was in pre-marital counseling because leaders felt they had been invited into the lives of the couple and were thus permitted to ask these types of questions. Leaders used pre-marital counseling as a place where abusive habits or behaviors could be discovered and confronted:

One of my responsibilities is to perform marriages. And so, as part of that I do several sessions of pre-marriage counseling. And so, it’s part of my responsibility to explore with couples how conflict manifests itself for them. How they deal with it. What kind of tools they have. So I listen very carefully in those sessions for anything that would hint of violence of any kind. I also, you know, watch closely the interaction between a couple to see if there are control issues, if there are rage issues…I listen carefully to their family backgrounds and if there is violence in a background, I often
will talk with them very specifically about that and question them about the kinds of help they receive. (W2, Mainline Protestant, p. 7)

It may be that leaders felt more comfortable addressing abusive behaviors or patterns within pre-marital counseling because couples sought the assistance of the leader in order to prepare for marriage. Within the context of pre-marital counseling, leaders felt invited to ask difficult questions and may feel more comfortable in this role to respond to potentially harmful patterns.

Outside of the context of pre-marital counseling, leaders also shared stories of confronting abuse and the reasons why they did so. One male, Mainline Protestant leader described a time of confronting abuse between a couple because the couple ran a children’s ministry in the church and he began to see the husband’s abusive language towards the kids in the ministry:

They were the coaches and I was working with them, and the wife revealed that he’d done A, B, and C, and very physical things. And she was a strong woman. (long pause) And…and then just over course of time, she told me more. And…then I started seeing (long pause)…forms of his…I don’t know—abusive self or his—his lack of boundaries with the kids, and, thankfully, he didn’t…discipline them or…but—but it was, uh…self-degree-endorsement and power-based coaching. All…the power was his. (M13, p. 9)

This leader shared that the husband came to his office and threatened him, coming close to beating him up and this interaction has made him wary of confronting abuse in the future.
Another male leader from a Black Protestant church (M20) also confronted abuse directly. He was trained as a military chaplain and as a pastor, he viewed his job as confronting abuse directly. This leader emphasized putting safety above the potential ramifications of confronting abuse such as threats to his personal safety or the fear that the person may leave the congregation, especially if they are a significant donor. It may be that religious leaders experience a reluctance to intervene in IPV situations for fear of the personal consequences or the consequences on the congregation if one or both members leave. This religious leader noted how confronting abuse may have consequences and religious leaders may be weighing them as they decide whether to confront the abuse: “a person who is a religious leader could be concerned about well is this one of the largest giving persons in the church and how will I be received if I go…they can be some formidable concerns for a religious leader” (M20, p. 6). While it may not always be financial, religious leaders expressed an overall reluctance to directly respond to IPV for fear of the impact it may have on their community or on them personally. Regardless of the context, some religious leaders addressed violence more directly when they witnessed it personally.

**Prayer.** Other leaders responded more indirectly to instances of abuse or when they were concerned about IPV within a relationship through prayer. Religious leaders used prayer for couples and from the pulpit to advocate and address IPV. Religious leaders described how personally, they used prayer in order to gain help and wisdom from God on how to best handle situations of IPV.
One male, Evangelical Protestant leader shared how he prayed and asked others to pray in order to respond to a situation of IPV in a wise and appropriate way:

When these kinds of things happen, you just throw up your hands and say, “Oh God please help me because I don’t know what to say. I don’t know what to do here.” I mean you can have all sorts of training, but every case, every couple or whatever is unique and I’ve looked to the Lord for wisdom in those things and asked people to pray you know with discretion...Just asking people to pray because we need divine help in all situations. (M4, p. 12)

For this leader and others, prayers served as an initial response to IPV in order to gain wisdom from God on how to respond to the situation. While leaders did not share what came of these prayers, it may be that leaders find comfort in prayer and seeking this divine support in order to respond to IPV.

Leaders also used prayer as a way to intercede for people experiencing abuse and viewed prayer as part of the response of the church. Leaders mentioned intercessory prayer (i.e., praying on behalf of others) as a strategy they used to encourage the church as a safe place for survivors:

Often we have included in our prayers, in intercession, people who are suffering from violence or from DV or intimate partner – so we use a variety of words. But my hope in doing that is that, that people will come to know that this is a safe place to go. (W1, Mainline Protestant, p. 12)
Leaders viewed prayer as a resource to themselves and to others as they sought to support individuals experiencing IPV and used prayer to raise awareness about IPV within the congregation, perhaps working to break the “holy hush” of IPV.

**Utilize resources.** When religious leaders described responding to IPV, some shared specific resources they utilized, sought out, or were offered within their denomination to assist them in supporting couples experiencing IPV.

Religious leaders from one Mainline Protestant denomination noted having a bishop who oversees the Chicago region and can serve as a resource on how to handle conflicts within the congregation such as creating safe space for the survivor and for the perpetrator if they continue to attend the same congregation. Other religious leaders emphasized the importance of mentors and others within their denomination or church as supports for addressing IPV and as referrals for both survivors and perpetrators. At times these individuals were prominent church members with more experience responding to IPV or people in the congregation who were survivors themselves and provided some form of informal, emotional support. Other times these individuals were formal leaders within their denomination or church that may or may not know anything about IPV. Leaders utilized other religious leaders to educate themselves to better respond to the complexities of IPV.

Religious leaders also noted tangible resources that they had access in order to assist survivors of IPV. These resources included resources such as safe housing, money, legal assistance, or free counseling services. For example, one
male, Mainline Protestant leader shared how he had given two women keys to the church in case they need a safe place to stay:

On two occasions I’ve given women keys to the church so that they could come here if something happened and they didn’t have anywhere to go.
And, …and I—I know that they found the church as a sanctuary and it just felt like the right thing to do. (M13, p. 8)

This leader along with other religious leaders noted having a packet of resources they turn to or provided to survivors in order to facilitate accessing resources. Multiple congregations shared having a small fund that they used to meet immediate needs such as housing for a survivor or transportation needs. One male leader in a Black Protestant congregation had money to send couples to counseling for 3 sessions if there was a conflict going on for longer than six months; the religious leader shared using this resource if the couple was working together towards reconciliation or struggling with abusive patterns and needed professional counseling. Another leader, a male pastor in a Mainline Protestant congregation, noted how his wife was a lawyer who has expertise in domestic violence. In cases of IPV, this leader utilized his wife’s expertise to support survivors:

I turn them over to my wife, where they just have a conversation on the phone, or she’ll meet them at the domestic violence court, or connect them with one of the students at the law school. That’s been a big… kind of, a way to concretely help somebody and not just give emotional support.

(M16, p. 6)
Personally, this was one of the most encouraging and interesting sections of the interviews for me as I learned about how congregations and leaders were motivated to use their resources to assist survivors in need. It was particularly interesting how religious leaders utilized their networks that stemmed beyond their role as a religious leader, such as their spouses, to seek out support for survivors of IPV.

**Established process.** A few religious leaders were in congregations with established processes, steps, or protocols to guide them on how to respond to IPV. Some leaders shared clearly written out denominational statements, while others expressed how their processes were more common and informal. These processes ranged from documented programs to scriptures that guided how to handle conflicts among congregation members.

One male pastor in a Mainline Protestant congregation shared how in his denomination, there is a clear stance on violence against women as well as established programs and activities that the congregation should be working towards in order to prevent and respond to IPV within their congregation. Within the interview, the pastor read different excerpts from the denominational statement from the United Methodist Church:

> The Church commits itself to listen to the stories of battered spouses, rape victims, abused children, adult survivors of child sexual abuse, and all other who are violated and victimized. The Church further commits itself to provide leadership to responding with justice and compassion to the presence of domestic violence and sexual abuse among its membership.
and within the community at large…Provide training and abuse prevention, detection, and intervention to church leaders. (M7, p. 9)

When asked if the congregation responded to the proposed programs and activities to address violence against women outlined in the denominational book, the religious leader noted how the denomination as a whole is addressing violence against women, but his congregation did not have any such programs or activities. The other elements of prevention, detection, and intervention called for within this document were not established processes within the congregation itself, but rather, the religious leader noted, the work of the denomination. Within the United Methodist Church, there seems to be a mindfulness to respond to IPV at the congregational level, but for this particular religious leader and others, creating programs and activities to address violence against women within their congregations had yet to be enacted.

Outside of formal processes, religious leaders noted informal processes and supports they utilized when responding to IPV. Leaders noted pastors, deacons, and care ministry persons played a part in their response through providing further support for survivors of IPV. One religious leader noted how any act of violence is reported to their core staff in charge of lay counseling and then the staff brings in a close group of people who are spiritually journeying with the couple to pray and be a part of accountability and intervention. This leader and others discussed an expectation that instances like IPV should be reported to key staff, to those in charge of care ministries like deacons or women ministry
leaders, and to the community involved with the couple to provide support and accountability.

Other leaders discussed being guided not by specific procedures, but by religious texts. More specifically, religious leaders cited a particular scripture in Matthew 18, which lays out how to handle grievances. One male leader from an Evangelical Protestant congregation used this verse as his understanding and basis for his response to IPV:

In Matthew 18, first…you know somebody does something to you, you’re to go to that individual. If they won’t listen then you take two or three with you. And if they’re not listening then you know, you take it to the church. And if they won’t listen to the church then you’re to treat them as a, it says pagan or whatever. You have nothing to do with them. And the point is not to ostracize them, but to remove them from the loving community so that they would say, “Man I’ve blown it. This is not good. I need to, I need to repent. I miss my loving community.” And so that's the goal of church discipline is to draw people back, but to not allow abuse to continue. (M04, p. 11)

For this religious leader, Matthew 18 laid out a response to IPV, however when asked about how this may fit within the context of IPV, this pastor experienced a tension around scripture and promoting safety. He was quick to mention the importance of safety first, but it seemed that this scripture was still a priority in his overall frame of how to handle conflict. As a note, this same scripture came up in another interview as a particularly harmful ideology a religious leader heard...
on a radio show. The female religious leader from a Mainline Protestant congregation noted how it may place women in dangerous situations because it fails to recognize potential dynamics of power, control, or patriarchy:

So that’s an example of a pastor using a scripture passage in a very ineffective way… I imagine that there are pastors all over who are using that scripture passage…to say, you know, if your neighbor sins against you, your first responsibility is to go to your neighbor and talk to him first. And then if you can’t resolve it together then you bring in two or three other neighbors. Well what they are gonna do if you’re, if you’re husband is on the church council, and brings in two or three other church members who are also on the church council and the pastor and, I mean it’s just so ridiculous. (W1, p. 20)

This particular scripture may be useful in other forms of conflict, but may not take into account the unique characteristics within a violent situation like IPV. Throughout these interviews, religious leaders noted the importance of taking into account the unique context of IPV and the potential dynamics of power and control at play within violence. However some religious leaders experienced a tension between how these scriptures are applied to IPV compared with other non-violent conflicts.

Community. While discussing their religious beliefs, many religious leaders discussed community as a key element in the healing process for survivors and in their response. Leaders noted community as a place of care, love, and encouragement for individuals suffering as a result of IPV. Some leaders named
this community as a small group who checked in and supported individuals, one male, Evangelical Protestant leader described how this relates to IPV when he expressed that small groups existed in his congregation:

Because we love you, because we care for you. We want to be involved in your life. And so, we’re gonna ask you questions. We are gonna be checking up. We’re going to be getting help if needed… and hopefully they’re part of… a small group of people and so the small group is there to encourage and help… that would be more accountability. (M4, p. 7)

Others described the work referenced within the redemption section of the present study where the broader community as a whole shows “how God works through the community, shows love. You know the suck level doesn’t change, but there’s redemption that comes through that… there’s ways to see that through this like she’s being lifted up, she’s being help up by a community, she’s being loved” (M10, Evangelical Protestant, p. 13). Not only did congregation members provide support, but religious leaders also noted how members have key skills such as social work or counseling skills that religious leaders have connected individuals to as part of their response to IPV.

Accountability. The leaders noted how the broader community and themselves as religious leaders also played a key role in holding perpetrators accountable. Accountability means holding someone responsible for their actions and may include a form of recompense to the survivors or a third party checking in regularly about if violence has reoccurred. Some leaders emphasized their role as a religious leader in providing this accountability, while others discussed a
small group of other congregation members or trained professionals who provided support for offenders. Leaders noted the importance of accountability within their role as a potential mediator between the reports of the perpetrator and the updates from the survivor about how progress is being made when the couple has agreed upon and is working towards reconciliation. Religious leaders encouraged or provided this accountability through regular meetings or check-ins to encourage change and connect perpetrators to resources such as trained professionals who often reported back to the religious leader. Religious leaders also noted using small groups as a resource for accountability within the community. Leaders utilized a small group of congregation members committed to the life of the couple or to each person individually to work together to support individuals both in caring for survivors and for holding perpetrators accountable. One male, Evangelical Protestant religious leader discussed how he asks perpetrators about their community as a key aspect of his accountability:

“Are you involved in the small group on Saturday with men and they know what you’ve done and what you are committed to do?” So that’s one way that I think the church is unique in that people can actually walk alongside people, and walk along this journey with them, and hold them accountable for free. (M6, p. 16)

This was one of the intervention strategies that religious leaders used as they brought in the broader community to assist them in responding to IPV. It may be that this strategy of bringing in the community may also begin to counteract the “holy hush” around IPV as perpetrators are held accountable for their actions and
as a community has the opportunity to support the survivor as a church
community or small group.

**Intervention/prevention.** Many religious leaders discussed the
intervention work of their congregation, such as assisting survivors in leaving or
in providing resources, but also noted how few prevention efforts directly
addressing violence in current relationships were within their congregations.
Leaders described their intervention work as counseling survivors on pursuing
safety, working with couples about the possibly reconciliation, or meeting
tangible needs such as housing or money. One male, Mainline Protestant leader
(M16) in particular discussed multiple methods of intervention that his
congregation provided, as discussed in the preceding sections, because his wife as
a domestic violence lawyer and was willing to provide services such as advocacy
and aid at court processing for survivors. This religious leader also addressed
immediate needs, even financial, through the church and worked with his wife’s
assistance toward preventative measures such as orders of protection to prevent
future violence. Outside of this example, many congregations noted tangential
services such as food programs or donations to shelters as ways they were
responding to IPV, however very few mentioned anything as comprehensive as
this religious leader. Most of what leaders were doing would be categorized as
crisis intervention with little prevention efforts within the congregation.

While most of what leaders described were intervention efforts, some
religious leaders discussed preventative measures. Multiple leaders described
their pre-marital counseling as preventative, one noted courses on budgeting,
conflict management, and parenting to address relational stressors and another religious leader discussed putting on workshops on healthy relationships for the youth within her congregation. Still an overwhelming amount of religious leaders in the present study did not mention direct prevention measures for IPV or other forms of violence against women. One female leader from a Mainline Protestant congregation reflected on the intervention efforts of their congregation and acknowledged the lack of prevention or even discussion there has been around IPV:

So if they wanted to go through a divorce, we would work with them through the divorce process. If they wanted to go to court, we would go through them through the court process. So just providing a lot of care for them and the family and the kids and everybody else that's involved. But it's really only in response of something. It's not necessarily preventative. I don't think it's preached somewhere. I don't preach a sermon on domestic violence or any intimate partner violence or sexual assault or any of that, so it's not something that's talked about a lot in churches. It's just, you know, oh, it's happening, like responding to it. So it's not preventative.

(W19, p. 12)

There were a handful of pastors that noted preaching a sermon on violence against women and even fewer that mentioned one focused on IPV. This may be a key area of growth for congregations as they begin to break a “holy hush” and move into a community that responds to and works against issues like IPV.

Organization Connections and Needs
Within the present study, I also asked religious leaders two questions about their connections to other organizations responding to issues like IPV and what they needed to better respond to IPV. These questions were asked independently of one another, yet they were intricately connected. Religious leaders reflected on how their congregations were (or were not) connected to organizations that address social issues like IPV and when asked about what they needed, it was often the very tools and resources that these organizations might provide. Not a single congregation interviewed was presently connected to an organization beyond basic service or volunteerism that conducted work related to IPV. Multiple religious leaders noted donating to shelters through special offerings or clothing drives, but no relationship existed beyond those donations. A few leaders mentioned specific congregational members who assisted them with resources or who were connected to organizations personally, but the congregation itself was not connected to this work directly. For instance, one congregational member used to drop off fliers for services from a particular organization to post in the bathroom:

The only connection we have with them, quite honestly, is that somebody from our congregation used to volunteer there. I don't think she does anymore now…but she would bring in those posters for us…We’d put them up. But I’ve never like met with them or volunteered over there or led a workshop with them. (W1, Mainline Protestant, p. 23)

This was true of two other congregations as well and when that congregation member was no longer as involved with the organization or congregation, these
resources stopped. One leader noted how in a previous congregation she was involved with in the city, there was a domestic violence ministry where the congregation, along with partner organizations, did trainings in the school that was attached to the congregation. While not a current partnership, this was the only mention of a congregation being deeply connected to an organization responding or working against IPV and responding to the issue beyond donations.

When asked what religious leaders needed to better respond to IPV, they shared a need of training and resources for both prevention and intervention. Leaders discussed a need for greater integration across the congregation in order to break the “holy hush” and to begin to talk about and address IPV within their congregation. One male leader of a Black Protestant congregation mentioned that due to his understanding of IPV being caused by stressors, discussing IPV should “be incorporated in our presentations, in a lot of those resource toolkits” (M09, p. 18) addressing such stressors such as conflict and finances. Others suggested bringing in organizations and experts to lead seminars and refresher courses on a regular basis to educate their staff and congregation members. Leaders reflected on how a talk or workshop may start the conversation, raise people’s awareness, and assist in connecting those members who want to get involved in responding to IPV:

The very first thing is…it would be nice to have a speaker come in…either an educator or give a one-hour talk or a group that would like to give a Saturday morning seminar or workshop. I think it would, first, it would sensitize the consciousness of people. Second, give an opportunity for
those who want to hear more information or want to get involved, to be active. So, I think that’s the thing that would be a bridge, to something more…for those who are interested in coming. (M13, Mainline Protestant, p. 15)

Leaders asked for training and resources on how to respond, specifically for challenging cases, for working with perpetrators, and for supporting the LGBT community experiencing IPV. Overall, religious leaders were in need of resources and training, which may be facilitated by community connections with organizations responding to IPV. Bridges built between organizations and congregations may better assist religious leaders in responding to IPV and may also increase the capacity of organizations to discuss the religious tensions that may arise for some responders and survivors of IPV.

**Summary and Synthesis of Key Findings**

On the next page is Figure 1 that presents a summary of the results, followed by a summary of the figure synthesizing previously outlined findings.
Figure 1. Visual summary model of key findings of the present study.
At the top and bottom are the two main themes that informed religious leader's understanding and response to IPV, “Definition and Description” and “Religious Beliefs +/-.” Below the “Definition and Description” is a central subtheme depicting religious leader’s description of IPV as a gradation of violence with physical violence falling on same side of the diagram as response because they were connected to one another. The gradation of violence is noted as a one directional arrow from emotional/verbal to physical because religious leaders expressed that emotional/verbal abuse were “lower” on the gradation of violence and also that “smaller” violent acts may slowly build over time to lead to “higher” forms of violence such as physical abuse. Under “Religious Beliefs +/-” there is a list of the religious beliefs that promoted both helpful and harmful responses depending on if the belief focused on “bad theology.” Religious leaders are represented along the center, in between their definition and description and their religious beliefs (top to bottom) and also between their role and their response (left to right).

While definition and religious beliefs shaped much of their thinking and understanding, the view of their role and the ways they responded seemed to be negotiated back and forth as they responded to instances of IPV, noted by a bidirectional arrow and a dotted line. The subthemes “Wary of Boundaries” and “Struggles/Tensions” are along this line because religious leaders brought these to light as they assessed if or how to respond in their role. For instance, when responding to IPV religious leaders expressed a tension between understandings their role of being invited into people’s lives, not wanting to act in ways that
abused their power, and feeling that they should confront or simply address the violent behaviors. Further informing their response, religious leader’s religious beliefs, as well as the causes they identified for IPV, both informed their response to IPV. For instance, viewing a cause of IPV as stressors, religious leaders were more likely to discuss addressing these stressors in courses provided by the congregation or through offering counseling to reduce relationship stressors.

As for religious beliefs, a view of forgiveness being central to the life of a Christian was more likely to evoke a response focused on reconciliation and bringing the couple together to discuss the abuse. Religious leaders also expressed how responding to IPV helped them to further understanding the complexities of the situation and informed their understanding and beliefs. For example, religious leaders shared how in some instances, exposure to or responding to IPV informed how they viewed forgiveness, having incorporated a greater understanding of the complexities of IPV and the unique power dynamics at play. On the other side of the line, religious leader’s view of their role shaped religious leader’s response to IPV as they negotiated how to respond in their role as a religious leader. At the top of their view of their role is support given this response was often more indirect such as prayer or referrals, at the side is how they are impacted in their role as a religious leader, and at the bottom is invited into people’s lives, which often encouraged religious leaders to respond in more direct ways such as confrontation or accountability.

At the bottom of the model separated by a thick black box is “Lack of Organizational or Community Connections.” Religious leaders noted a variety of
needs for training and education, however had no connections to organizations outside of their denominational resources. Thus, “lack of organizational connections” remains separated out from the rest of the model as well as at the base of the model given that these connections may better support religious leaders in their overall understanding and response to IPV.

Discussion

This study examined the various ways religious leaders understand and respond to survivors of IPV and how their religious beliefs may inform their response. Using a thematic content analysis of 20 interviews with Protestant Christian religious leaders, results revealed that many religious leaders had not directly responded to IPV nor received formalized training on how to respond. Throughout, both religious leaders who had responded and those who discussed how they would respond expressed a tension between their role, religious beliefs, and responding to IPV. Furthermore, religious leaders were not connected to other resources or organizations in the community, which may be particularly important for religious leaders who acknowledged their need for greater training and connections. The implications of these findings are now discussed to demonstrate the tension experienced by religious leaders and may inform research and trainings for religious leaders and congregations on how to respond to IPV in a way that promote survivor safety and foster a greater understanding of IPV. Thus, I first discuss major findings and implications, followed by the specific implications for intervention and collaboration with other organizations, and
conclude by highlighting the limitations of the present study and future directions for research on this topic.

**Major Findings and Implications**

While the present study illuminated how some religious leaders had opportunities to respond to violence, the majority of religious leaders reported that they did not have much opportunity or experience responding to IPV. Some religious leaders shared strategies they used to encourage others to seek help or disclose their experiences such as sharing their own personal experience of abuse or discussing abuse in sermons or prayers before the congregation; however, these efforts did not result in survivors seeking help from or disclosing to religious leaders. While religious leaders may serve as resources to survivors, it may be that religious leaders are also in a prominent role within congregation and thus may be viewed differently than other informal responders who do not hold such a formalized role within the congregation. Research with sexual assault survivors notes survivors are more likely to seek help from smaller networks that are not highly interconnected (Dworkin, 2015) and the centralized nature of a religious leader’s role may be viewed as highly interconnected to the rest of the congregation, thus posing a barrier for survivors to utilize this support. Future research should explore how survivors view seeking help from religious leaders and the potential facilitators and barriers to seeking religious leaders as a source of help when experiencing IPV. Future research may also work to identify areas of connection between religious leaders and their religious beliefs in order to
facilitate the discussion of IPV within congregations more broadly to start to break the “holy hush” (Kroeger & Nason-Clark, 2010; Nason-Clark, 2004).

While the majority of religious leaders shared limited to no direct experience responding to IPV, the present study revealed religious leaders understood IPV in a variety of ways. For instance, many religious leaders described violence as a gradation with degrading talk or name calling on the lower end (e.g., more emotional or verbal forms of violence) and forms of physical abuse on the higher end (e.g., actions that involve physical harm or violence). Religious leaders viewed physical violence as “crossing a line” and more severe than “lower” forms of violence, a concerning finding given literature into survivor’s experiences of abuse. Follingstad, Rutledge, Berg, Hause, and Polek (1990) conducted a study among women with a history of physical abuse and found that for some women, emotional abuse felt more severe than physical abuse. By viewing emotional or verbal abuse as lower on the gradation, religious leaders and others may discredit the devastating impacts these forms of abuse can have and may fail to acknowledge the intertwined nature of different forms of abuse. Research should further explore this gradation of violence from the perspective of both responders and survivors.

This gradation of violence may also relate to how previous literature emphasizes distinguishing between different types of abuse. Indeed, past research suggests accounting for the context and cause of different types of abuse as they may necessitate a different response (Johnson, 1995; Johnson & Ferraro, 2000). Researchers suggest distinguishing between situational couple violence (e.g.,
episodic), terroristic control (e.g., rooted in power and control), violent resistance (e.g., self defense), and mutual violence (e.g., both partners being violent to fight over power and control). In particular for terroristic control, the origins of these acts of violence are rooted in power and control and thus such violence often escalates to more severe consequences in order to gain further control. Taken together, the origin and severity of this type of violence emphasizes the importance of early intervention and addressing dynamics of power and control within a response. For religious leaders, their understanding and response seem to be informed by distinguishing between the physical impacts of different types of abuse rather than considering the underlying causes of the abuse that may motivate controlling and abusive behaviors. For instance, verbal and emotional abuse is viewed as “lower” on the gradation perhaps because of a lack of visible physical consequences, however emotional abuse is noted as one of the main types of abuse used to gain power and control within abusive relationships (Johnson, 1995). It seems that religious leaders may benefit from further understanding of dynamics of power and control at play within violent relationships, the impact of emotional abuse on survivors, and ways to address these dynamics within the context of abuse. Future research may also explore the prevention efforts of congregations towards IPV and how religious leaders are working to address these dynamics of power and control within their congregation and broader society.

Religious leaders viewing violence along a gradation may also create a hierarchy of abuse and a hierarchy in response, placing greater importance and
weight on responding to physical abuse than other “lower” forms of violence. Inadver
tently, this view of violence as a gradation may impact disclosure, help-
seeking, and the overall well-being of survivors through communicating that some forms of abuse (i.e., physical abuse) are more valid, important, or real than others (i.e., verbal or emotional abuse). Research also suggests that emotional and physical violence are intricately tied and often the emotional violence escalates to physical violence (Follingstad et al., 1990). Thus, emotional abuse may not only have significant impacts on the survivor, but also may contribute to other forms of violence such as physical violence. Because research suggests emotional and verbal violence may contribute to physical abuse, these “lower” forms of violence may be key aspects to address within prevention efforts. Future research may explore why these forms of violence are seen as “lower” and the role that addressing these forms of violence may have in prevention efforts targeted at reducing IPV.

Religious leaders were also informed in their understanding and response to IPV by their view of the intersection of culture, race/ethnicity, and gender. Some religious leaders discussed how certain factors may exacerbate a vulnerability to experiencing abuse, such as gender, immigration status, or access to services. Religious leaders also linked potential stressors that exacerbate IPV to larger systems of oppression, which disproportionately impact those from particular genders and racial/ethnic backgrounds. However, religious leaders did not discuss how they were working to address these larger systemic issues beyond meeting basic, tangible needs. Religious leaders and their congregations have the
potential to be settings that house and support social services (Ammerman, 1997; Maton, 2008; Maton, Domingo, & Westin, 2013), and also have the capacity to provide support to counteract harmful systems as demonstrated by the Black Protestant church’s role in the Civil Rights movement (Moore, 1992). However this potential has yet to be realized within congregations responding to IPV and the larger systems that may create vulnerabilities or stressors related to IPV. A closer examination of the IPV experiences of different religious and cultural groups, such as immigrant populations or Latino/as congregations, is warranted provided the unique ways that culture, race/ethnicity, and gender may intersect in different contexts and communities. Future research may also assess how religious leaders may or may not address systemic issues within their congregations and the strategies leaders take to counteract harmful systems.

Additionally, the present study highlighted how many religious leaders struggle within their role to respond to IPV. Religious leaders expressed a reluctance to inquire about or confront potential abuse for fear of overstepping their role or the impact it may have on the individual, themselves, or the broader congregation. Some religious leaders seemed to feel caught between being invited into people’s lives and also not wanting to abuse their power by inserting themselves into a couple’s relationship. Perhaps related to their view of IPV as a result of power and control, confronting abuse was viewed as a “power-play” move that represented another abuse of power by religious leaders. While the hesitancy to confront abuse may express an important awareness of the potential risks and negative outcomes of confronting abuse, such as risking survivor-safety,
the role of a religious leader as invited into people’s lives may be particularly key in early intervention in situations of abuse. Research suggests the importance of early intervention through proactive discussions on healthy relationships and screening for abuse within a variety of settings, such as in healthcare (García-Moreno, 2002). Organizations that interact with survivors have noted the importance and usefulness of resources such as specific questions to screen for IPV or protocols on how to respond to abusive relationships (García-Moreno, 2002; Waalen, Goodwin, Spitz, Petersen, & Saltzman, 2000). Given that religious leaders feel they are invited into other’s lives in their role, leaders have the potential to screen for abuse and be a resource to survivors who may be experiencing barriers to disclose or seek help. Future research should explore the usefulness of specific screening questions or protocols within congregations on how to inquire about potential abuse, as they may be particularly helpful for early prevention and intervention and may serve as useful tools to help religious leaders feel equipped to respond to IPV and that such actions are part of, rather than antithetical to, their role.

Some religious leaders also experienced a tension between their role within the congregation and their role in responding to IPV. Religious leaders expressed tensions between being survivor-centered and safety-focused while also addressing religious beliefs about marriage, forgiveness, and accountability for perpetrators. Religious beliefs posed as both helpful and potentially challenging in religious leader’s response to IPV as they navigated conflicts between their role and their response to IPV. Past research suggests that religious leaders may feel
caught in their role between their personal values for survivor safety and the congregational religious beliefs, such as a strong emphasis on reconciliation or divorce as a last resort, which may pose as a roadblock to religious leaders responding in safety-focused ways (Nason-Clark 1999; Ware et al., 2003).

Research has emphasized the importance of acknowledging the complex dynamics of abuse within IPV and some religious leaders in the present study acknowledged the importance of doing so (Pence & Paymar, 1993, West, 2005), however others struggled with navigating between their role, response, and religious beliefs. This was expressed by many religious leaders throughout the study and warrants further exploration on how religious leaders navigate the tension between their role, their response, and their religious beliefs. The present study demonstrates how religious leaders may be caught between these seemingly competing forces, prompting the need to further explore how religious leaders may be supported and encouraged to respond to IPV in ways that align with their role and religious beliefs.

While religious leaders expressed a need for more knowledge and awareness about IPV and the themes and tensions described by participants in the present study represent the religious leaders sampled, it is also important to acknowledge that not all religious leaders may experience these tensions. Perhaps some religious leaders may promote harmful responses to IPV due to a strong religious belief in suffering, marriage, or forgiveness that does not take into account the context of abuse and oppression. Additionally, a lack of information about IPV may have shaped why so many religious leaders noted they had not
responded to IPV in the present study. Some religious leaders may have seen IPV, but dismissed it as not “counting” as IPV due to a lack of knowledge or misinformation about IPV. Furthermore, some religious leaders may ascribe to various myths about violence against women or may hold negative attitudes towards women that contribute to harmful, victim-blaming responses (Flood & Pease, 2009). The acceptance of rape myths, hyper-masculinity, and relational or sexual aggression have all been connected to the perpetration of violence, survivor’s responses to such violence, and the community and system responses to violence against women (Flood & Pease, 2009; Nayak et al., 2003). Thus, while the present study represents religious leaders who did not directly endorse violent or victim-blaming attitudes, it is important to acknowledge that some leaders may hold these beliefs and that the themes discussed throughout the discussion are general themes and not universal to all religious leaders. However, in the present study, religious leaders expressed a general tension on how to respond to IPV in ways that respected their religious beliefs and role as a religious leader while also promoting safety for survivors.

Despite the tensions participants expressed, religious leaders were also motivated by their religious beliefs to respond to IPV in ways that align with key research on IPV and helpful responses. For instance, some religious leaders were motivated to respond based on the view of each person’s worth. Religious leaders viewed affirming the survivor’s worth and dignity as a crucial step in their process of responding to IPV. Relatedly, research on IPV suggests that affirming self-worth and increasing self-efficacy are key protective factors to IPV and also
increase the resilience of survivors as well (Carlson et al., 2002; Short et al., 2000). Indeed, certain religious beliefs such as beliefs about worth, justice, and compassion motivated religious leaders to respond to IPV. Furthermore, these religious beliefs may be key in building bridges among religious leaders and organizations to discuss their motivations to respond to IPV and to incorporating a religious perspective to a community response.

Additionally, the present study found that religious leaders and their congregations lack connections to the community or to a community coordinated response. Despite literature on the positive impacts of community coordinated responses and the importance of incorporating a diverse membership (Foster-Fishman, 2011) in order to meet the multifaceted needs of survivors (including spiritual concerns; Drumm et al., 2014; Goodman & Smyth, 2011), religious congregations may still be absent from such efforts. Indeed, researchers have noted the importance of incorporating informal social networks, such as religious leaders into more formal responses because these members may be crucial in responding to the social, emotional, and spiritual needs of survivors (Goodman & Smyth, 2011). However the barriers to creating bridges between religious congregations and a coordinated responses have been noted as these groups struggle to develop a collaborative relationship that fosters trust and creates shared vision to form a cooperative and comprehensive response to IPV within the community (Nason-Clark, 2000; Putnam, 2001; Skiff, et al., 2008). It may be particularly important for congregational leaders to be connected to community agencies, and vice-a-versa, as the two may be able to inform one another about
balancing the tensions of religious beliefs and safety concerns in a manner that respects a survivor’s religious perspective while also prioritizing their safety (Nason-Clark, 2009). The present study may provide an understanding of the religious perspective to addressing IPV and highlights how religious beliefs of justice and compassion may be used to foster a shared vision with those involved in a community response to IPV. Future research may not only explore how to incorporate religious leaders into a more formalized response, but may also explore the religious concerns and needs of survivors in further depth to better equip and inform both religious and non-religious responders on how to address the multifaceted needs and concerns of survivors in empowering, healing, and respectful ways.

Furthermore, by incorporating religious leaders into a larger community response, the divide between the sacred and secular resources may be bridged. In particular, past research suggests that some religious leaders may feel uncomfortable referring survivors to other resources where particular religious beliefs (e.g., the sanctity of marriage) may not be respected or where responders may discourage survivors from staying connected to their religious community (Nason-Clark, 2009). Thus, religious leaders may not connect survivors to needed services and may not be connected themselves to a wider community response that may shape their own awareness and response to IPV. Referrals may be key to address the multifaceted concerns of survivors and assist survivors in identifying and seeking further help. Thus, future research is warranted into the barriers to these collaborative relationships and how they may be addressed in
order to increase the capacity of religious congregations and community responders to respond to the multifaceted concerns and needs of survivors of IPV.

Overall, while religious leaders expressed a hesitancy in responding directly to abuse due to a lack of training or the potential harm of confronting abuse in inappropriate ways, such a response may perpetuate a “holy hush” around IPV (Kroeger & Nason-Clark, 2010; Nason-Clark, 2004). The barriers to disclosure and help-seeking include a fear of losing support, denial of abuse, and isolation, all of which may be further exacerbated by a “holy hush” about IPV (Alaggia et al., 2012; Trotter & Allen, 2009). Religious leaders may have an opportunity to hear about or witness warning signs of abuse and reduce these barriers through expressing concern for the survivor and providing a safe, accepting space focused on listening, validating, and providing the survivor with resources if they would like resources or referrals (Sylaska & Edwards, 2013; Trotter & Allen, 2009). However, religious leaders may choose to not respond to IPV warning signs out of fear or a lack of knowledge of how to respond. While responding uninformed is not encouraged in the present study, religious leaders may be missing an opportunity to denounce the abuse and begin to break the “holy hush” of congregations in regards to violence. While the present study raises this issue, future research is needed to explore the perspectives of survivors and the specific ways that religious leaders can adopt an empowering, survivor-centered approach to acknowledging abuse and supporting survivors within the context of their role as religious leaders of congregations.

**Implications for Intervention and Collaboration**
The present study also holds implications for working with and training religious leaders to respond to IPV. The present study may inform future trainings for religious leaders through discussing the religious beliefs that may arise for survivors and religious leaders when responding to IPV. Through engaging in a discussion of the potential helpful and harmful beliefs, religious leaders may be better equipped to navigate these beliefs with a survivor and encourage religious leaders to respond in safety-focused ways that are also in line with their religious beliefs. These trainings also may address and inform how religious leaders respond to perpetrators, emphasizing best practice responses that incorporate accountability without an emphasis on the restoration of the relationship. Furthermore, these trainings may incorporate religious beliefs of justice and compassion in particular in order to assist religious leaders in navigating the tensions between their religious beliefs and responding to IPV. Future research may also develop and test religious specific protocols that provide religious leaders with outlined steps that help facilitate religious leader’s understanding of their role within the congregation in addressing and responding to IPV in ways that are safety-focused and in line with best-practices. Indeed, such trainings and protocols may reduce the conflict between religious beliefs, religious leader’s role, and their response to IPV in ways that better inform and equip religious leaders to be empowering and safety-focused.

Not only does the present study hold implications for the content of trainings, but this study may also encourages collaboration between the community and religious leaders in order to provide these trainings and also
strengthens the community response. Religious leaders in the present study expressed a need for training and community connections to assist them in providing resources. In particular, these trainings may work to increase religious leaders’ understanding of IPV through educating leaders on dynamics of power and control within IPV and the recidivism rates of perpetrators. Further collaboration is also needed to educate religious leaders on best-practice responses and future research should explore the barriers and benefits to such collaborations. Indeed, the present study highlights how religious leaders may be motivated by religious beliefs about justice and compassion and these beliefs may be a point of connection between organizations and religious congregations. Such connection and collaborations may build a stronger collaborative community response through facilitating bridges between the sacred and secular and may better equip both religious and non-religious responders to meet the multifaceted needs and concerns of survivors.

Limitations and Future Directions

Although these findings contribute a rich exploration of how religious leaders understand and respond to IPV, they are not without limitations. First, findings are limited to the City of Chicago. Chicago is a large, urban city in the Midwest and findings should be viewed in light of the characteristics of the city. Future research should explore how the understanding and response to IPV of religious leaders in other areas of the United States, especially given resources, congregations, and other IPV organizations within a community will vary across different contexts and states. Second, the present study was limited to Protestant
Christianity. While this allowed us to explore the depth and uniqueness within Protestant Christianity, future research may look into beliefs of Catholic traditions and other religions as they may have unique beliefs that shape their understanding and response.

Third, despite recruitment efforts to sample a wide variety of religious leaders from each of the three different Protestant traditions, the sample is of congregations and leaders that are predominately White. Future research may explore the understanding and response of religious leaders in congregations that are more racially/ethnically diverse, as well as diverse on other congregational demographics such as socioeconomic status. Additionally, there were only two religious leaders from Black Protestant congregations that participated in the study. While the present study was not centered on Black Protestant congregations and how Black Protestant religious leaders understood and responded to IPV, the historical and racial/ethnic themes that may arise from a deeper look into Black Protestant congregations and the response of their leaders are a particularly important and rich area for further study. Given both Womanist theology and the unique characteristics and history of the Black Protestant church, future research may explore in further depth the ways in which history and experiences of oppression, specifically of Black women, may shape the understanding and response of the religious community to experiences of IPV. Additionally, future research may explore religions traditions in greater depth. Given the diversity within the Protestant Christian traditions, research may explore different religious tradition or denominational beliefs that may shape
religious leader’s understanding and response to IPV. Such research may aid in
the creation of specific denominational trainings and/or protocols to aid religious
leaders in responding to IPV in safety-focused, empowering ways.

Lastly, the recruitment strategy used in this study invited religious leaders
to participate and required religious leaders to follow-up in order to be
interviewed. Thus, religious leaders who participated may be more comfortable
speaking about or sharing their opinions about IPV than other religious leaders.
While it is unknown why some religious leaders did not choose to participate in
the study, it may be that religious leaders felt they did not have enough experience
and training, or that they felt their views of IPV would be unfavorable to disclose
and thus, decided to not participate. This is a common limitation in research
regarding violence against women and other sensitive topics. Future research
may explore the views and responses of religious leaders to IPV in more depth
and may take measures to reduce socially desirable responses through using more
confidential or anonymous methods. Such research may elicit more honest or
controversial views about IPV.

Conclusion

Overall, the present study illuminates the strategies and struggles of
religious leaders in responding to IPV and the various tensions they face in their
desire to support and empower survivors in ways that align with their role and
religious beliefs. Given that religious leaders may be responders to IPV within
their role, the present study may help to inform trainings and collaborations
among responders to better incorporate religious leaders as a part of a community
response, as well as to address the religious concerns or needs of survivors. Such connections may educate religious leaders on how to respond, connect them to resources, and assist them in navigating the tensions between their role as a religious leader and the ways in which they respond to survivors within their congregation. Overall, religious leaders respond to IPV within their role and may be uniquely positioned to promote survivor-centered and empowering responses to IPV both in their congregation and in the broader community. It is the hope of this study that additional research will continue to shed light on how religious leaders respond to IPV, how to equip religious leaders in their response, and how to create bridges between religious congregations and organizations to better collaboratively respond to IPV. Clearly, more research is needed to understand how religious leaders and a broader community response can better meet the spiritual needs of survivors and counteract the “holy hush” about IPV.
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WHO, 2002


doi:10.1111/1468-5906.00
APPENDIX A: RECRUITMENT LETTER

Dear [Name of Religious leader],

My name is Jaclyn Houston and I am a graduate research student at DePaul University. I am conducting a research study for my dissertation to better understand how religious leaders and their congregation respond to intimate partner violence, defined as “physical, sexual, or psychological harm by a current or former partner or spouse” (Center for Disease Control and Prevention, 2014).

I learned about your congregation [HOW] and I would be interested in interviewing you about your congregation’s response to IPV and how you as a religious leader have helped survivors of IPV and what religious beliefs shape that response.

The interview would range from an hour to an hour and a half at a location convenient to you and will be audio recorded.

If you would like to participate in this study, please email me at jhoust12@depaul.edu and I can set up a time to meet. If you are not interested, please forward this cover letter and my information to other religious leaders in the Chicagoland area who may be interested.

Thank you so much for your time.

Cordially,

Jaclyn Houston

Email: jhoust12@depaul.edu
APPENDIX B: INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

[The interview is organized into general themes with open-ended questions. This is an unstructured interview; therefore, the topic flow and time spent on each theme will be unique for each participant. However, to cover each of the main themes, interview prompts may be used to elicit further elaboration.]

INTRODUCTORY STATEMENT
Thank you so much for taking time to discuss intimate partner violence (IPV). First, I will ask you some demographic questions about you and your congregation. Then I would be interested to hear about how you think about IPV and how IPV may come up in your role as a religious leader. Throughout, I am curious about how religion, religious beliefs, or religious faith may come up as you respond to IPV.

I simply want to learn more about your personal experiences, feelings, and thoughts. This conversation is being recorded for research purposes. You may request that the recording stop, choose to not answer a question or end the interview at any time. Do you have any questions?

DEMOGRAPHICS
I am going to start with a couple of questions to learn a little more about you and your congregation.

- How long have you been a religious leader in this congregation?
- What year was the church founded?

- What specific denomination is your congregation?
- What is your average weekly attendance?
- How would you characterize your congregation theologically (Conservative, Middle of the Road, Liberal)? Politically?
- How would you describe the racial/ethnic composition of your congregation? [if possible use a follow-up probe for general percents]
- How would you describe the socioeconomic status of the neighborhood where your congregation is located? Your congregation itself?

Now I’d like to ask some questions about you.

- In a minute or two, can you briefly tell me about how you decided to become a religious leader?

- What is your age?
- With what gender do you identify?
- How would you describe yourself racially/ethnically?
- What is your current relationship status? [follow-up probe: Are you married/in a relationship?]

Now let’s talk about IPV. I am interested in how you describe IPV and how IPV has come up in your role as a religious leader. Just to note, I wish to respect the confidentiality that you have with someone who seeks your help as their religious leader. As much as possible, let’s try to not use names or personal or identifying details. I will be sure to de-identify any transcripts by using a pseudonym or changing any identifiable information.

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

As a religious leader, how do you understand IPV?

[Potential Prompts]
- How would you describe/define IPV? What constitutes IPV? What causes IPV?

How, if at all, does IPV come up in your role as a religious leader?

- Can you tell me an example or two about a time when you had an individual come to you about IPV? When IPV came up in your role as the leader?

[Potential Prompts]
- As a religious leader, what do you think your role is in responding to IPV?
- How does IPV come up in your role as a religious leader
  - With survivors?
  - With perpetrators?
  - Within the larger congregational community?

In your role as a religious leader, how, if at all, do your religion or religious beliefs inform your response to IPV?

[Potential Prompts]
- Regarding suffering, marriage, forgiveness, and gender roles?
- How do your religious beliefs shape your response to IPV?
- Are there particular:
  - Beliefs? Theological teachings?
  - Scriptures? Stories from scripture or other sacred texts?
  - Denominational protocols/policies?
  - Religious traditions or other rituals?

How, if at all, is your congregation involved in responding to IPV in the larger community through coalitions or organizations outside of your walls?

[Potential Prompts]
- Can you tell me more about how that came about?
- How, if at all, does this shape your response?
What do you need as a religious leader to better respond to IPV?

THANK YOU
Thank you so much for your time. Is there anything else you would like people to know about your response to IPV as a religious leader? I really appreciate how you have shared your experiences with IPV in your role as a religious leader. It was wonderful to meet you and I am so grateful for you assisting me in my research.
APPENDIX C: INFORMED CONSENT FORMS

ADULT CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH

Intimate Partner Violence and the Response of Religious Leaders

Principal Investigator: Jaclyn D. Houston

Institution: DePaul University, Chicago, Illinois, USA

Department: Psychology

Faculty Advisor: Megan Greeson, PhD, DePaul University, Psychology

What is the purpose of this research?
I am asking you to be in a research study because I am trying to learn more about how religious leaders assist survivors of intimate partner violence (IPV) and how their religious faith shapes the nature and form of the response. This study is being conducted by Jaclyn Houston at DePaul University and is supervised by Megan Greeson, Ph.D. and Nathan Todd, Ph.D.

I hope to include about 30 people in the research.

Why are you being asked to be in the research?
You are invited to participate in this study due to WHAT.

What is involved in being in the research study?
If you agree to be in this study, you will be asked to complete an audio recorded interview. If you agree to participate in this study you will be asked about your experiences assisting survivors of IPV in your congregation and about how your religious faith shapes your response. I will then transcribe the interview for a record of what you said. If I employ a professional transcriber, they will sign a confidentiality agreement to ensure your privacy.

How much time will this take?
The interview will take about an hour to an hour and a half to complete. It is possible that I may want to follow-up with you at a later date to clarify something I discussed. Your permission will also be asked for a short (15-30 minute) follow-up contact in case I need to clarify something I discussed. You can let us know your preference below, and it is okay if you do not want to be contacted in the future, or to decide later not to talk with us.

Are there any risks involved in participating in this study?
Being in this study does not involve any risks other than what you would encounter in daily life. However, there is always a chance for unexpected risks, such as discomfort when answering questions that discuss potentially emotionally
distressing topics. If you feel uncomfortable at any time, you can withdraw from this study without penalty or can ask to skip any questions at any time.

Given that this research is focused on organizations working the Chicagoland area, it is possible that readers of reports of this research may identify the community in which the research took place, especially if the readers of the reports or research are familiar with your congregation. Thus, I cannot promise that your responses will be kept confidential. However, in any publication, report or presentation of research that may result from this study, I will either present the data in aggregate form (meaning that no individual’s responses will be presented) or, when presenting individual responses, will use pseudonyms. In some cases even the use of pseudonyms is not expected to provide anonymity. In such cases, I will invite you to review and grant/deny in writing permission for any presentation of data that identifies you or runs a reasonable risk of identifying you. The major risk of this possible identification is that it may alter other people’s perception of you.

Are there any benefits to participating in this study?
You will not personally benefit from being in this study. However, I hope that what I learn will help improve the knowledge about and responses to IPV in religious congregations. Your participation may also benefit other religious leaders and responders to IPV who seek to help survivors as this study may be used to create trainings and resources for religious leaders to assist in their understanding of IPV and how to respond.

Can you decide not to participate?
Your participation is voluntary, which means you can choose not to participate. There will be no negative consequences, penalties, or loss of benefits if you decide not to participate or change your mind later and withdraw from the research after you begin participating.

Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your status or employment with Rape Survivor Advocates.

Who will see my study information and how will the confidentiality of the information collected for the research be protected?
The research records will be kept and stored securely. Your information will be combined with information from other people taking part in the study. When I write about the study or publish a paper to share the research with other researchers, I will write about the combined information I have gathered. I will not include your name or any information that will directly identify you. I will make every effort to prevent anyone who is not on the research team from knowing that you gave us information, or what that information is. However, some people might review or copy our records that may identify you in order to make sure I am following the required rules, laws, and regulations. For example, the DePaul University Institutional Review Board may review your information. If they look at our records, they will keep your information confidential. If I
employ a professional transcriber or a research assistant to assist in transcription, they will sign a confidentiality agreement to ensure your privacy. The audio from this interview will be stored in a secure location for approximately eight years, and will then be destroyed by erasing the files. I will be providing the interview transcripts that do not have any of your personal, identifying information to RVA in order to learn about your experience as an advocate and to improve advocate well-being and experience. If you would like to elect out of your de-identified transcript being provided to RVA, please let the interviewer know.

**Who should be contacted for more information about the research?**
Before you decide whether to accept this invitation to take part in the study, please ask any questions that might come to mind now. Later, if you have questions, suggestions, concerns, or complaints about the study or you want to get additional information or provide input about this research, you can contact the researchers, Jaclyn Houston, (jhoust12@depaul.edu) or her faculty sponsor, Megan Greeson, Ph.D. (mgreeson@depaul.edu).

This research has been reviewed and approved by the DePaul Institutional Review Board (IRB). If you have questions about your rights as a research subject you may contact Susan Loess-Perez, DePaul University’s Director of Research Compliance, in the Office of Research Services at 312-362-7593 or by email at sloesspe@depaul.edu.

You may also contact DePaul’s Office of Research Services if:

- Your questions, concerns, or complaints are not being answered by the research team.
- You cannot reach the research team.
- You want to talk to someone besides the research team.

**You will be given a copy of this information to keep for your records.**

**Statement of Consent from the Subject:**

I have read the above information. I have had all my questions and concerns answered. By signing below, I indicate my consent to be in the research.

Signature: ______________________________________________

Printed name: ____________________________________________

Date: ______________
Consent to be contacted at a later date:

☐ I consent to be contacted at a later date for follow up regarding this interview. Checking here does not obligate me to participate at this later date, only to be contacted for possible participation.

Preferred Method of Communication:

☐ Phone: ____________________________

☐ E-mail: ____________________________

☐ Other: ____________________________

☐ I **DO NOT** consent to be contacted at a later date.