



The Dinah Project: Churches Offering Hope to Sexual Violence Victims An Interview with Monica Coleman



Sexual violence is all too prominent in our society. Congregations are faced with how best to help prevent violence, and how best to care for the victims, their abusers, and those related to the trauma. Monica Coleman has worked to empower churches to stand with and advocate for victims while addressing the pastoral needs of abusers and affected faith communities.

• Overview

Monica Coleman founded *The Dinah Project* in 1997 to be an organized church response to sexual violence in our society. *The Dinah Project* began at the Metropolitan Interdenominational Church in Nashville, Tennessee. Within three years, thousands of people in the local Nashville area and beyond had experienced The Dinah Project in person or through radio or television.

Monica wrote *The Dinah Project: A Handbook for Congregational Response to Sexual Violence*, a step-by-step guide to help congregations acknowledge, think through, and organize a spiritual response to sexual violence. Chapters describe how to organize educational workshops, provide church-based counseling, and design healing worship experiences around the issues of sexual violence in the community.

• About Monica Coleman

Monica Coleman describes herself as a minister, scholar, writer, and activist. Her expertise in religion and sexual violence has made her a national presenter at churches, colleges, seminaries, universities, and conferences. The interdenominational preaching magazine *The African American Pulpit* named her one of the "Top 20 to Watch—The New Generation Leading Clergy: Preachers Under 40."

Much of her passion to speak out against sexual violence through The Dinah Project grew out of her own life as a rape survivor. She carries her message throughout the church as an ordained Itinerant Elder in the Michigan Conference of the African Methodist Episcopal Church. (In the AME tradition, Itinerant Elders travel and preach at different congregations.) She also serves on the Bennett College for Women faculty, teaching in the Womanist Religious Studies Department.

• Interview

John Dale, on behalf of the Congregational Resource Guide, interviewed Monica Coleman late in 2005:

CRG: How does your work and ministry relate to congregational life?

Monica: My ministry—particularly speaking of *The Dinah Project*, relates directly to congregational life! Sexual violence in the community is everyone's issue—not just the perpetrators and victims—but the whole community is involved. I chose to name the project after Dinah (pronounced Dee – nah in Hebrew), a young woman in the Book of Genesis—the youngest daughter of Jacob—who was raped by Shechem. Jacob's sons sought revenge and there was resulting trouble. But it is easy to imagine that Dinah was left to suffer her pain alone. "No one said anything," as the story so often goes after a rape. Even so, a much wider circle of people besides Dinah herself become participants in the pain in some way. She is largely overlooked and forgotten among the Old Testament figures. Shame is powerful.

Just to stress this point further—there are far more people who have suffered from sexual violence than the community may know. One out of six women in the United States has been the victim of rape or attempted rape. Men are victims as well. Estimates tell us that one out of ten males have been sexually assaulted. These are the reported statistics, and yet rape is one of the most underreported violent crimes in the country. The Rape, Abuse & Incest National Network (RAINN) tracks and regularly updates these statistics.

Chances are very high that there are people in your church who carry with them the pain and suffering of having been raped or otherwise sexually assaulted. The subject is too painful and too much of a taboo for churches to grapple with—yet our churches are called to be agents of love and healing. The Dinah Project is a way to help churches respond to this need.

For churches to be sanctuaries where the Kingdom of God is present, a lot of work has to be done to make them safe and spiritual. A holistic support system, realistically, would be built over time. Ideally, it would include access to hospitals, psychological counseling, legal aid, and—of course—opportunities to address the spiritual crises people experience when sexual violence occurs.

The spiritual crises affects everyone—the victims, victimizers, and all the people related to them. A lot of people are in need of healing. If a congregation spends some hard work and energy on these efforts, eventually a day will come when that community will be ready to disarm the silence and pain. Healing will happen and people will walk out of that place with new dignity.

CRG: Can you give us some nuts and bolts examples of the kinds of programs individual congregations can do to begin this healing process? What if you're a small church and you don't have much money?

Monica: Then what? If you're a small church with few resources, you can start very modestly. Everything in ministry starts small. Church members who are interested in this issue could go out into the surrounding community where their church is located and talk to people addressing the sexual violence issue.

The church could learn about the community resources—who and where are the community resources that deal with sexual violence? Talk to the people at your local rape counseling center, hospital, or police department. Find out what is available for people in your community so that the church and/or the pastor can be helpful in recommending support. Perhaps a small group of church members could go together—take a field trip to a counseling center, for example—and begin creating a circle of people within the congregation who will be advocates for further church responses down the road.

For the congregation that has done a lot of preparatory work to raise awareness and provide safe places to talk honestly about these issues, a worship service or liturgy of healing can be very powerful. Depending on a church's particular traditions and what the people are ready to do, these worship experiences can be done in many different ways.

The Dinah Project Handbook describes, in detail, some worship alternatives. Elements in a healing worship could include all or some of the following:

- Personal testimonies (always very powerful)
- A sermon addressing the issues
- Counselors or social workers available in the sanctuary to attend to anyone who becomes distraught or feels they need immediate pastoral care

I have done liturgies and worship services that have included Communion or the celebration of the Lord's Supper and the Laying On of Hands—both can be very healing experiences for people. Powerful music is always good.

CRG: What about children? How do you recommend churches talk with children about these issues of sexual violence?

Monica: In the *The Dinah Project*, we have done some programs with children from middle school age to young teens. Older youth—those in their late teens—could be taken on a field trip to a counseling center or rape crisis center, for example. For both age groups, teaching opportunities and conversations centered around questions such as, "What is an appropriate (healthy) relationship?" can be done. Respect, honor, and dignity are all values that children can incorporate.

CRG: Are there places where The Dinah Project has been implemented—or where the ministry of response to sexual violence is taking place? Can you recommend any other sources on these issues?

Monica: The church where we first tried the programmatic responses outlined in *The Dinah Project* The Metropolitan Interdenominational Church in Nashville, Tennessee, is as good a church as any to examine. They have been doing this work for a few years now but we had to start from the beginning there just like any other congregation.

Additional resources Monica Coleman recommends to congregations:

Black Church Domestic Violence Institute (BCDVI) www.bcdvi.org

Grounded in the belief that violence has been a force in the history of Black communities, and that the church is called to improve the quality of life, this organization works against violence as expressed in physical, sexual, psychological, spiritual, emotional, and economic abuse. It is made up of people "concerned about the issues of domestic violence in families and in all human relationships and the response of the Black Church."

BCDVI provides support, advocates for domestic violence prevention, and develops leaders through partnership and collaboration. It works to "empower and protect victims of domestic violence; to hold abusers accountable; and to promote healing and wholeness in African-American communities" by building partnerships between churches and those in secular society who work with domestic violence victims and abusers. These include law enforcement agencies, battered women shelters, and social service practitioners. The goal is to insure that women "will not have to choose between their faith and their safety."

Available resources include *The Preachers: Working to End Sexual and Domestic Violence*, a video that includes a series of sermon clips from clergy who have suffered from partner abuse. Each clip includes discussion of domestic violence as it relates to issues of faith. A companion study guide can be used to facilitate discussion. The organization's Web site contains helpful tips, *What Men Can Do*, for example, and a good media kit. BCDVI has developed a Domestic Violence Sabbath Observance program that includes promotional materials, a prayer litany, a model sermon, candle lighting ceremony, and related educational materials.

FaithTrust Institute www.faithtrustinstitute.org

FaithTrust Institute "provides in-depth analysis, sets the agenda, and calls forth the best from religious and secular organizations to address and prevent sexual and domestic violence." Serving an international, culturally-diverse, multifaith constituency, FaithTrust provides resources that address the religious and cultural issues related to abuse.

These resources include free materials (a thorough collection of topic overviews and articles), video and Internet products, in-person training, seminars, and consultations.

FaithTrust Institute focuses on different aspects of abuse, including domestic violence, child abuse, clergy ethics & sexual abuse by clergy, teen relationships & dating violence, and sexual violence. For each topic, the Web site provides an overview, answers common Q & As, explores the topic's religious aspects, reviews what FaithTrust Institute offers related to the topic, provides links to additional information and related services, and includes a series of related articles. A downloadable bibliography includes books coded for each subject topic, different faith expressions (Jewish, Protestant, Catholic, Buddhist, and Muslim), different cultural communities (Indigenous, Immigrant, and African American), and in Spanish and Asian languages.

Interfaith Sexual Trauma Institute www.csbsju.edu/isti/

ISTI helps to create "safe, healthy, and trustworthy communities of faith." ISTI promotes understanding, awareness, prevention, and healing of sexual trauma and power through research, education, and publication. It works with faith communities, clergy and faith leaders, survivors, offenders, and those who care for them—providing resources while advocating for systemic change.

ISTI offers a Web-based distance learning program, a series of books, free online articles, a downloadable bibliography containing 4000 books, and access to additional internet, educational, and referral resources.

Of special interest to congregations or denominational leaders are the articles: Guidelines for Sexual Ethics in Ministry and Recommendations for Prevention of Clergy Sexual Misconduct.

This interview is part of the "Wise Voices" effort, which gathers thoughts and essays from people who know congregations. These are leaders with know-how—through first-hand knowledge, academic study, or practical experience. If you are or know of a "Wise Voice" we should include, please contact us at info@crg.org.

The Congregational Resource Guide,

www.congregationalresources.org, is a free, non-commercial guide to resources developed specifically for congregations. Provided as a gift to American congregations from the Lilly Endowment Inc. through The Alban Institute in consultation with the Indianapolis Center for Congregations and other specialists.