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# Theorizing Religious Abuse within the Context of Intimate Partner Violence

The African American Community

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**ABSTRACT**—This work conceptualizes the perpetration of religious abuse within the context of intimate partner violence (IPV). Some scholars have examined the importance of spirituality or religion in the lives of domestic violence survivors, and only a few have explored how abusers use religion to mistreat their partners. This gap in the literature has caused religious abuse itself to be understudied, as a method of control within IPV. The author presents an argument supporting the need to acknowledge religious abuse, details a set of tactics that may be used, and describes the occurrence of this abuse through the description of a theoretical model that focuses on the African American community.

**KEY WORDS**—intimate partner violence, domestic violence, African American, religious abuse, black church

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## Introduction

INTIMATE PARTNER VIOLENCE (IPV) IS THE MOST COMMON FORM of violence against women worldwide, with major consequences for individuals, communities, and governments. Nearly 1 in 3 women and 1 in 10 men in the United States have experienced rape, physical assault, and/or stalking by an intimate partner (Black, Basile, & Breiding, 2011). At the extreme end of physical violence is death. Although death is rare when compared to other consequences of IPV, the United States has the highest rate of intimate partner homicides, amongst the 25 wealthiest countries in the world (Hemenway, Shinoda-Tagawa, & Miller, 2002; Paulozzi, Saltzman, Thompson, & Holmgreen, 2001). While women have been shown to assault their partners at similar rates, they remain the primary victims of IPV due to greater physical, financial, and emotional injuries experienced at the hand of male partners (Archer, 2000; Straus, 1997). For those who survive each year in the United States, an estimated 5.3 million women are affected by intimate partner violence. Without considering the impact of male victimization, the results translate to nearly 2 million injuries and more than \$4 billion in direct medical and mental health costs (National Center for Injury Prevention and Control, 2003). Furthermore, the combined medical, mental health, and lost productivity costs of IPV against women are estimated to exceed \$8.3 billion per year (Max, Rice, Finkelstein, Bardwell, & Leadbetter, 2004).

Various types of non-physical abuse occur within IPV and include maltreatment through psychological, emotional, sexual and economic means. However, these types of abuses are not exclusive in their manifestation, and other less documented types of abuses occur within intimate partnerships. Particularly, research has shown that perpetrators of domestic violence use religion against their intimate partners as controlling and abusive tactics (Hassounah-Phillips D. S., 2001; Bent-Goodley & Fowler, 2006; Miles, 2000), however discussion on this type of abuse has been limited within the academic literature. No detailed list of tactics or theorization of how this form of abuse operates has been uncovered in review of relevant literature. Because the Black church continues to serve as a pillar of strength and guidance for many victims and survivors of violence (Pinn, 2001), the examination of how perpetrators may use their partners faith to control them is necessary for a better understanding of intimate partner violence in general. This work begins with an argument establishing the

need to theorize the major components of IPV related religious abuse.<sup>1</sup> A model describing IPV related religious abuse in African Americans is then presented. Each component of the model is discussed and theory on the relationships between each of the components are supported through reviewing the findings within relevant literature.

## The Need to Theorize Religious Abuse Within Intimate Partner Violence Amongst African Americans

Unfortunately, the occurrence of all types of IPV is higher amongst African-Americans and Hispanics (Lockhart, 1987; Straus & Smith, 1990; Straus, Gelles, & Steinmetz, 1980) compared to Caucasians. Even after controlling for social class, age, and other factors, racial/ethnic differences in IPV still persist (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 1998). With many survivors of domestic violence turning to their faith-based communities for support, guidance, and safety (Adams & Fortune, 1995; McClure & Ramsay, 1998), it is important to understand the many relationships between religion and domestic violence, especially within marginalized populations.

Some existing work has been comprised of empirical studies exploring the role of religion in correlation with intimate partner physical abuse or child abuse (Simonic, Mandelj, & Novsak, 2013). Many researchers have focused on the general relationship between religion and domestic violence, theorizing for example that religious involvement could legitimize or reduce the likelihood of committing intimate partner violence. The debate on this statement is growing as evidence emerges in the literature. One line of thought with supporting evidence, is that because of religious ideas that encourage loving behavior and anti-violence, religious involvement could serve as a protective factor against committing IPV (Ellison, Trinitapoli, Anderson, & Johnson, 2007). Another philosophy suggest that because of religious ideas that encourage ridged gender-roles, religious involvement could facilitate controlling or dominating behavior of women by men. Regardless of which relationship is more likely, the fact exists that abusers *can* and *do* use religion to legitimize their behavior and maintain a positive self-image (Simonic, Mandelj, & Novsak, 2013; Bent-Goodley & Fowler, 2006). In such cases their religious beliefs play a key role in facilitating violence instead of preventing such behavior (Bottoms, Shaver, Goodman, & Qin, 1995).

Research studies concerning religious abuse in the family is scarce (Simonic, Mandelj, & Novsak, 2013) yet its existence has many negative con-

sequences (Novsak, Mandelj, & Simonic, 2012). Although it could be stated that psychological or emotional abuse encompass religious abuse, the attack on one's spirituality is significant enough to be explored separately, as opposed to providing a limited understanding through study of it as part of the larger dimension of emotional abuse (Bent-Goodley & Fowler, 2006). Even though it is difficult to describe because of its complexity (Bent-Goodley & Fowler, 2006), religious-related emotional abuse has its specifics that make it stand out from other forms of emotional abuse (Simonic, Mandelj, & Novsak, 2013). While research has shown that perpetrators of domestic violence use religion against their intimate partners as a controlling or abusive tactic, information is limited since none of the aforementioned work has focused on religious abuse itself. Relevant findings on the matter, although insightful and important, have more often been a secondary or tertiary outcome of research on a separate topic.

Developed under a feminist and womanist framework, with particular attention on African Americans who may be involved with majority Black congregations (commonly referred to as "The Black Church"), Figure 1 depicts key components in IPV related religious abuse from a Christian perspective. While the model was informed by a list of spiritual and religious abuse tactics (compiled in Appendix A), most of the discussion is done through a Christian lens and thus, makes reference to God rather than "a Higher Power", as the theology of some Black churches dictate. This theoretical framework proposes that actions using religion as a means of control include intentions of moral fear spreading, draw on theological reasoning as justification for abuse, and aim to attack the victims' relationship with God. These tactics threaten the survivors sense of morality, which is inextricably linked to their relationship with God (a direct source of strength). In addition, the use of these tactics threaten connectedness to the Black church, which is also a key social support system for the survivor. The framework considers connectedness to the Black church and the survivors' relationship with God as positive factors that deserve to be protected but are unfortunately being attacked directly because of their deep importance. This model is particular to African Americans, because the Black church is a significant source of social support within the African American community (Lincoln & Mamiya, 1990; Taylor, Thornton, & Chatters, 1987). The strength and depth of this institution as a resource is particularly unique to the community. While other religious groups may have strong influence on their congregants or within neighborhoods that they

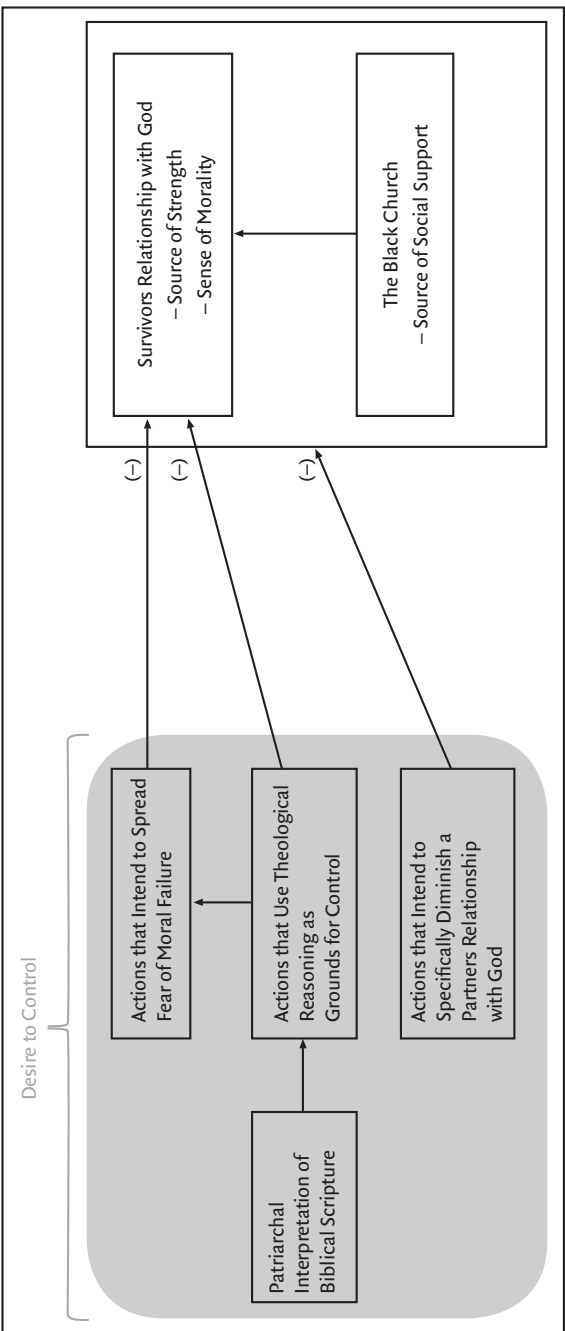


Figure 1. Model of intimate partner violence related religious abuse among African Americans. The negative signs within the model (-) indicate that that when actions underneath a 'desire to control' are used, they may diminish a victims relationship with God and connection to the Black church as a source of social support, rather than facilitate the development of those items in the model. Additionally, conventional notation in theoretical models often uses directional arrows to represent causal relationships, however this model does not intend to convey that all connections between concepts are causal in nature. In text description of the variables detail how they are conceptually related.

operate, the relationship of another religious organization may differ in its connections to IPV related religious abuse.

## Patriarchal Interpretation of Biblical Scripture

Abusers may use patriarchal threads in religious discourse to facilitate or tighten control (Stotland, 2000) by initiating a tug-of-war between their partners' religion and a safe or healthy intimate relationship. Researchers note that when a woman is confronted with scriptures that discourage her from seeking relief from an abusive partner, she may be more likely to stay in the relationship out of a sense of guilt (Rotunda, Williamson, & Penfold, 2004). A tool developed by Gray-Reneberg conveniently organizes biblical scriptures that those in a patriarchal society could interpret for use as a means of dominating women. The 26 scriptural references within the tool identify and highlight scriptures that could be interpreted to view women as the subjects of men, inferior in nature, and deserving of control. With most African-Americans (83%) identifying as Christian (Orlich & Smith, 2013), attention to the use of such scriptures for the purpose of control in intimate relationships is concerning and complex, yet valuable to further understand IPV related religious abuse. Examples of these biblical scriptures are Colossians 3:18; 1 Corinthians 7:4; and 1 Timothy 2:12 (Gray-Reneberg, 1996).

I don't let women take over and tell the men what to do. They should study to be quiet and obedient along with everyone else. —1 Timothy 2:12 The Message Version (MSG) . . .

Wives, submit yourselves unto your own husbands, as it is fit in the Lord. —Colossians 3:18 King James Version (KJV) . . .

The wife hath not power of her own body, but the husband: and likewise also the husband hath not power of his own body, but the wife. —1 Corinthians 7:4 (KJV) (Bible Gateway, 2014)

While these biblical passages are often interpreted as sexist statements against women, many African American men and women have still embraced Christianity for its ability to inspire hope and courage. A literal and figurative place of refuge, amidst a myriad of social challenges faced by Blacks, many African Americans continue to take comfort between the walls of "The Black Church".

## The Black Church and Its' Role as a Source of Social Support

The term “The Black Church” is used by scholars and much of the general public as a sociological and theological shorthand reference to the variety of Black Christian churches in the United States (Lincoln & Mamiya, 1990). Seven major Black denominations account for more than 80 percent of Black religious affiliation in the U.S. (Roof & McKinney, 1987).<sup>2</sup> The remaining 15 to 20 percent of Black Christians are distributed among many small Black religious sects, the Roman Catholic Church, and other white Protestant denominations. However, the overwhelming majority of Blacks belonging to these denominations are still part of predominantly Black congregations, despite the denominational affiliation with a white organization (Lincoln & Mamiya, 1990). In general, any Black Christian person may be included in “The Black Church” if they are a member of a Black congregation. The Black church, which is central to the faith-based experience in the African American community has traditionally been a main source of support and help for various psychosocial problems (Billingsley, 1999), despite the fact that the church is not always a safe place for survivors to talk about IPV (Wendt, 2008). Nonetheless, because of a history of institutional racism and cultural insensitivity in the U.S. (which led to the absence of formal and mainstream social service for African Americans) the Black church has provided various forms of counseling and social service delivery.

Gillum et al (2006) found high religious involvement a predictor of greater social support for abused women of color but not for Caucasian women (Gillum, Sullivan, & Bybee, 2006). For abused women in particular, social support acts as a protective factor against the negative effects of IPV on mental and physical health (Coker, et al., 2002). Since the Black church is a source of social support, providing spiritual uplifting and a place of important social interaction (Lincoln & Mamiya, 1990), it is not surprising that women of color turn to their faith-based communities before they go to mental health, social service, or medical care providers (Bell & Mattis, 2000). The reliance on this social support network gives reason to believe that perpetrators of IPV may attack this source of strength in an effort to grasp tighter control over their victims. Therefore the focus on religious abuse within the intimate partnerships of African Americans is deliberate and justified.



## Religion/Spirituality as a Source of Strength

Survivors in general speak of their spirituality as a sustaining force to address the abuse in their lives (Davis, 2002). Women who have endured IPV in particular, note spirituality as a source of strength and a point of vulnerability (Hassouneh-Phillips, 2003; Potter, 2007). Furthermore, African-Americans tend to report comparatively higher levels of religiosity (Taylor, Chatters, & Levin, 2004), turn to prayer as a coping resource more frequently and in a wider range of circumstances than whites or any other racial group. They also tend to derive considerable satisfaction from this form of coping (Ellison & Taylor, 1996).

## Survivors' Relationship with God and Sense of Morality

Spirituality is a component of life that has the ability to both confine and liberate, based upon one's vision and understanding of who God is and what God's requirements are. These ideals are often also shaped by the race and gender dynamics of U.S. society (Frederick, 2003). For African American women specifically, their faith empowers them to be consistent in their trust of God to protect them, but also may open them up to be vulnerable as a target for those who desire to prey upon the seriousness of their relationship with God. Particularly, attacking one's sense of morality through scriptural manipulation, as a means of control is powerful because religious beliefs that are held closely by the victim could already be a point of internal contention (especially those regarding gender roles). Additionally, the attack on one's sense of morality can be an indirect means of deconstructing that person's relationship with God since they are so inextricably connected (Walker L. J., 2003).

## Actions that Target Spirituality and Use Religion to Control Intimate Partners

Religious abuse can take on many forms in the context of intimate partner relationships. Two forms have been discussed most frequently in the literature. The first form characterizes the abuser, who turns to theological explanation and reasoning as grounds for physical abuse of their partner (Bottoms, Shaver, Goodman, & Qin, 1995). The second form regards emotional abuse, whereby spreading fear, instilling religious beliefs that trigger

feelings of fear, guilt, and shame in the abused individual (Capps, 1995). A third form of religious abuse surrounds a set of tactics that have not been discussed as frequently in the literature, but are presented in this paper. It suggests that religious abuse can have the specific intention of diminishing a victim's relationship with God, religious involvement or religious practices. These three aspects of IPV related religious abuse are experienced differently, with the use of various tactics, and are conceptually distinct, but they also tend to engender one another, therefore they are described below in greater detail. Specific examples of each factor are outlined in Appendix A.<sup>3</sup>

### *I. Theological Explanation and Reasoning as Grounds for Control/Maltreatment*

Abusers manipulation of religious text in order to gain power and control over IPV survivors has been documented amongst American Muslim women (Hassounah-Phillips D., 2003; Hassounah-Phillips D. S., 2001), but not as much attention has been focused on African American Christians. However, the literature does reveal that patriarchal interpretation of biblical scripture does facilitate actions that use theological reasoning as grounds for control of women. While no biblical scripture urges a husband to physically punish his wife, theological explanation of women's position, responsibilities, and expectations in certain texts can view women as less than men. The interpretation of such scriptures and their subsequent use for maltreatment are inherently abusive acts because they reduce the value of women to that of property, employing emotional abuse, the use of isolation, and defense of male privilege (Gray-Reneberg, 1996).

Miles (2000) notes that the following phrases are often used by perpetrators on their victims:

1. "Submit to your husband. He is the head of you as Christ is the head of the church"
2. "The wife does not rule over her own body, but her husband does"

For those who identify their relationship with God as an important component of their lives, these women in particular are vulnerable to actions that aim to use biblical text against them. While scriptures themselves can be used to demand subservience through direct quotation, strategic selection of *ideas from scripture* can also be used as reasoning for maltreatment of a partner. This tactic is related but it is described separately in the next few paragraphs, since it can operate in a less tangible form.

## *II. Spreading Fear of Moral Failure*

When quoting direct scripture is not enough to gain or maintain control, abusers may shift towards actions that capitalize on religious principles that are more generalized, as a way of instilling and triggering feelings of fear, guilt and shame in the victim (Novsak, Mandelj, & Simoncic, 2012). When some survivors fail to “rise” to the religious ideal described by the perpetrator, their sense of morality is diminished, having a direct impact on how they view their relationship with God. For example, a number of women are told by abusers that violation would stop if they were more submissive (Alsdurf & Alsdurf, 1989), as submissiveness to a spouse is often an indication of religious virtue, within the Christian framework. It has also been reported by those in the Black Church that abusers will often emphasize the need for the woman to forgive (their partners behavior) despite abuse (Bent-Goodley & Fowler, 2006), as forgiveness is also a strong principle in the Christian belief system. By intending to spread fear of moral failure in the victim for not being submissive or forgiving, the abuser uses the victims desire to please God as a leverage point for control. For many African American women, their relationship with God and their desire to please God is a considerable factor in their decision making processes on various topics, including decisions made within intimate relationships (Frederick, 2003).

Miles notes other commonly used comments that are not direct scripture, but prey upon the survivors desire to uphold religious principles, which may be derived indirectly from scriptures. He reports that the following phrases are often used by perpetrators on their victims:

1. “You have to work harder at being a better wife”
2. “Pray that you will be able to endure the pain”
3. “God will not give you more than you can bear”
4. “Divorce is a sin. You must do everything in your power to keep your family together” (Miles, 2000)

## *III. Specific Intention of Diminishing One’s Relationship with God or Religious Practices*

Abusers often try to break down the social support networks of their victims (Walker, 1979) and attack resources that bring strength to survivors of IPV, since those resources could empower victims to escape the power

and control of their abuser. Thus, there is reason to believe that perpetrators who use these tactics would also have the specific aim of destroying a survivor's relationship with God or sources that support the survivors' relationship with God, such as connection to the Black church. In a qualitative study interviewing African American church leaders and congregants on ways in which domestic violence affects and interacts with spirituality/religion, participants revealed various ways that abusers use religion to control an intimate partner, including abusers who denied a woman's ability to attend church (Bent-Goodley & Fowler, 2006). As the abuser realizes the value of religion and spirituality in the victim, such actions have the specific intent of targeting and diminishing the victims relationship with God because it is known by the abuser to be particularly important, a source of strength, and related to the moral esteem of the survivor. These acts manifest through actions that criticize or ridicule the religious practices of the individual, restrict access to church services/functions and also involve the physical destruction of religious materials.

## Limitations

The limitations of this work and its proposed model are primarily related to whom the model does not target. The discussion is not tailored to sexual minorities (i.e. those who are homosexual, transgender, etc.) even though it may be possible for these groups to experience or perpetrate the tactics described. This limitation makes the constructs discussed exclusionary, since many of the tactics presented may be specific to the experiences of heterosexual or married couples. Additionally, those who acknowledge a higher power, but not the God within Christianity, may be excluded if the attacks on their spirituality are made through tactics that have not been discussed. Furthermore, this discussion and model is centered on African-Americans within a broad Christian framework. It does not highlight or evaluate the influence of denomination. Examining possible differences in how IPV related religious abuse is perpetrated amongst various denominations in the Black church could be an area of focus in future research since particular tactics could be linked to specific denominations.

Lastly, this work does not explore religious abuse in the context of other worldwide religions or populations and is limiting since it may exclude African-Americans who practice other faiths. While most African-Americans identify as Christian (83%) and only 1% of African-Americans

identify as Muslim (Orlich & Smith, 2013), between 23.8% and 53% of Muslims in the United States are African American (Hassounah-Phillips D., 2003), giving concern that a portion of the population may not be able to identify with items built under a Christian framework. Nonetheless, further understanding of religious abuse under a Christian framework may provide insight to IPV related religious abuse in other religions.

## Conclusion

The true cause of IPV related religious abuse as a phenomenon is unknown. It can only be speculated through review of relevant literature that the components discussed contribute to its manifestation and motivations for being used. Progress in understanding this problem has the ability to inform faith-based communities and domestic violence service providers survivors in different ways. African American church leaders and congregants report that if faith-communities had a better way of understanding or method of describing IPV related religious abuse, it would be discussed and addressed more often. They also indicate that highlighting IPV related religious abuse would help faith-based communities in directly addressing the problem (Bent-Goodley & Fowler, 2006).

Batterer intervention curriculum could be expanded to discuss this form of abuse and its group facilitators could be trained on how to challenge participants' justifications for perpetrating this form of abuse. Victim services could use the related research to further their understanding of survivors' experiences and prepare themselves for responding to the particular experiences of those who have been subjected to this type of abuse. Work that bridges the gap between religious communities discussions of IPV and social service providers conceptualizations of IPV provide a more thorough understanding of a very difficult problem; one that is both evasive and complex. The problem of IPV is evasive because neither men nor women form a homogeneous category and it is complex because there are multiple factors that contribute to IPV. Continued understanding of IPV must involve an acknowledgment of religious abuse as a legitimate type of abuse and an understanding of how perpetrators use the tactics that have been discussed.

Evidence suggests that psychological forms of abuse may be equally as harmful, if not more so, than physical forms of abuse (Follingstad, Rut-

ledge, Berg, Hause, & Polek, 1990). Thus, a better understanding of religious abuse is essential if any headway is to be made in addressing the serious harm caused by this form of abuse. Further research will enable social scientists and theologians to do the following 1) examine the nature and extent of religious abuse, 2) understand the impact that it has on the physical and mental health of survivors, 3) infer the implications that it has on one's ability to escape abusive partners and 4) gather a better picture of how perpetrators abuse or exercise control over their partners. With a richer understanding of IPV related religious abuse, clinicians, researchers, and clergy can work together in developing new interventions to address this issue, while modifying existing programs to effectively respond. Despite the reluctance of some congregants and church leaders to define IPV related religious abuse because of its complexity (Bent-Goodley & Fowler, 2006), the implications for forming a more cohesive understanding of this type of abuse and its manifestation has the potential of informing practice in unique ways.

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**Maxine Davis** is a doctoral student at Washington University–St. Louis in the Brown School of Social Work. Holding MSW/MBA degrees, her research interests are centered on intimate partner violence. Davis is guided by former work in Batterer Intervention Programs and hopes to contribute to scholarly work that improves service delivery.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

No conflict of interest has been declared by the author.

## APPENDIX A: LIST OF IPV RELATED RELIGIOUS ABUSE TACTICS

### **Factor 1. Theological explanation and reasoning as grounds for control/maltreatment of a partner**

Used a scripture to support or justify abusive behavior towards your partner

Pressured, demanded or took sex from your partner on the basis of religious ideals

Told your partner God would not condone divorce or separation when they tried to leave the relationship because of abuse

### **Factor 2. Spreading fear of moral failure**

Told your partner they would go to Hell or Heaven based on making a decision about your relationship

Pressured your partner to forgive you on the basis of religion

Told your partner they were being a bad Christian or hypocritical for not following your orders

Blamed your partner for *your own* spiritual or religious deficiency (i.e. for being a bad Christian)

### **Factor 3. Specific intention of diminishing one's relationship with God or religious practices**

Purposely destroyed or damaged your partners religious material (i.e. taped sermons, Christian books or pamphlets, Bible, etc.)

Told your partner to not read scripture or pray

Accused your partner or implied they were having an affair with a church member or minister

Prevented/forbid your partner from attending church or a church function

## NOTES

1. Religion vs. Spirituality. Unlike spirituality's more individualistic quest for meaning and connection to the sacred, religion is often distinguished as an organized, more formal system of worldwide views, behaviors and rituals used

to assist one's closeness to God (Koenig, McCollough, & Larson, 2001). Therefore, religion often involves spirituality. However the reverse is not necessary and in the context of this paper, the terms 'religious abuse/religion' and 'spiritual abuse/spirituality' are used interchangeably.

2. The seven major historic black denominations are: the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church; the African Methodist Episcopal Zion (AMEZ) Church; the Christian Methodist Episcopal (CME) Church; the National Baptist Convention, USA, Incorporated (NBC); the National Baptist Convention of America, Unincorporated (NBCA); the Progressive National Baptist Convention (PNBC) and the Church of God in Christ (COGIC) (Lincoln & Mamiya, 1990).

3. The list of items presented in the appendix have been derived from numerous sources, including domestic violence literature and personal knowledge of the author. Items were captured not only from a review of quantitative and qualitative studies that revealed survivors experiences with abusive partners, but also from theoretical and anecdotal literature describing control tactics used by abusers. Grey literature from government agencies, foundations, and various agencies was also explored. Using this strategy allowed a range of reliable material to contribute to a broader understanding of IPV related religious abuse.

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