

On behalf of Still Waters Ministries and Conestoga Mennonite Church.....WELCOME.

We are grateful for your presence here today.

The first time I came face to face with this monster called domestic violence was on March 18, 1985. That was the day I got the news that my baby sister took her own life at the young age of 22. That was also the day I learned that she had been the victim of domestic violence at the hands of her husband since their marriage in 1980. That was the day I learned that on one occasion, her husband forced a handgun in her mouth and told her that if she ever tried to leave him, he would not only kill her, but her family as well. That was the day the world changed for me.

Then...on December 11, 1998 I received news that my oldest nephew had taken his own life after an onset of situational depression after his wife separated and took their daughter.

I believe that both my sister, Evelyn...and my nephew Greg...would be alive today had they received the right intervention and counseling for their respective situations.

And so..... Still Waters Ministries grew out of a vision of providing no-cost counseling services to hurting and uninsured/under-insured persons living in Chester, Berks and Lancaster counties. That vision became a reality over 4 years ago when SWM opened its doors here at Conestoga Mennonite Church.

At this moment in time, we have provided nearly 5000 hours of counseling services and have saved clients hundreds of thousands of dollars. All our services are provided at no cost to the clients.

We see clients with an array of concerns: addictions; depression; fears and anxieties; issues with self-esteem or those in need of some life coaching. Services have included individual counseling, couples counseling, & even family counseling. And, we have served individuals as young as 6 and as old as 90.

About three years into our ministry, we started seeing an increase in the number of women suffering from domestic violence; sexual abuse; physical and/or emotional abuse. And two years ago we established Lilies of the Valley, providing counseling, education and safe housing for individuals suffering the domestic violence.

In very difficult situations, we provide security and help. Lives are being changed. And, in some cases, lives are being saved....literally. People can feel abandoned and ignored during hard times, especially when they do not have the necessary financial resources to pay for the help they need.

On June 3rd and 4th of this year, Still Waters Ministries, together with Conestoga Mennonite Church, hosted our very first women's conference on abuse. Nearly fifty women attended the conference.

Attending the conference were women representing almost every age group. There were women who had escaped abusive relationships, women who were in the throes of an abusive relationship, and women who had a heart for women suffering at the hands of an abusive partner.

There were so many holy moments and I got so much more from the conference than what I gave. During the breaks, women huddled together in small groups....holding each other and praying for one another.

But the one thing that we heard at the conference loud and clear from these women was the message that their church leaders needed to be a part of such a conference. Church leaders needed to hear and learn the things they were hearing and learning. And that is what has brought us to this time here today.

A few months ago I came across an article about abuse and injustice directed at a young girl in the country of India.

A teenage girl, dressed in pink, sits in the dirt before six community elders.

In a scene captured on a cellphone video, one of the men wags his finger angrily at her. He rages: This girl must be punished.

A villager ties her waist with rope, holding the other end, and lifts a tree branch into the air. She bows her head. The first lash comes, then another, then another. Ten in all. She lets out a wail.

Eventually the crowd starts murmuring, “Enough, enough,” although nobody moves to stop the beating. Finally, the man throws down his stick. It’s over.

The girl is 13 years old. Or maybe she is 15. Her family doesn’t know for sure. She has never set foot in a school and has spent most of her life doing chores at home, occasionally begging for food and performing in her father’s acrobatic show, for which she is given 20 rupees, about 30 cents.

The male-dominated councils that govern villages in India are hundreds of years old and have been known for their harsh punishments. In March 2016, this 13-year-old girl was whipped by the village council.

Her crime? Being too scared to tell anyone her father had raped her.

We are always shocked and taken back by these kinds of atrocities occurring in third world countries around the world. But, in the pointing of fingers of condemnation towards these third world atrocities, we must also look at these events as opportunities to examine what is happening within the borders of our own country and within the very walls of the buildings in which we work and worship.

In our country, in our communities, and within many of our businesses and churches, there still exists inequality between men and women.

In our country, female full-time workers make only 79 cents for every dollar earned by men, a gender wage gap of 21 percent.

African-American women earn 64 cents and Latina-American women earn 56 cents for every dollar earned by a Caucasian man.

Women experience internal promotion rates that are 34 to 47 percent lower than for men. It also doesn’t matter whether they’re entry-level or at the top of their company.

A mere 4.2 percent of chief executive officers at Fortune 500 companies are women.

In our country, 31% of female workers claimed to have been sexually harassed at work. 51% were harassed by their supervisor. 62% who were targeted took no action.

Within the walls of our churches, domestic violence is the same, if not higher than outside the church.

In many of our churches, scriptures are often misinterpreted in order to suppress women and to destine their position in the church and in society.

In many of our churches, a woman cannot hold any position in ministry.

In many of our churches, women have to go to a man for spiritual guidance or help....including situations involving sexual and physical abuse.

All these practices, and there are many more, contribute to a devaluation of women in this country. And, just like the culture of many third world countries, when any group is devalued, it opens them up to discrimination and abuse.

So, despite the indisputable gains over the years, women are still being raped, trafficked, violated and discriminated against -- not just in the rest of the world, but here in the United States.

In our country, American women serving in Iraq or Afghanistan are more likely to be raped by a comrade then killed by an enemy.

In our country, one in five women on college campuses have experienced a sexual assault.

In our own country, Carie Charlesworth, a mother of four, was fired from her Catholic school teaching job not because of anything she did. She was fired because her husband violated the court's "protection from abuse" order by stalking her workplace.

In our own country, rapes in the military and rapes on college campuses go unpunished because “boys will be boys,” and winning wars and football games are more important than protecting the integrity of the women who are the victims of rape.

In many of our churches, women are taught to “joyfully submit” to their husband and to find contentment in their roles as helpers and homemakers.

In many of our churches, victims of abuse are blamed and shamed for inviting the abuse or tempting the abuser.

In many of our churches, victims of abuse are effectively silenced by telling them the reporting of such a crime would reflect poorly on the church and, in doing so, would damage the reputation of Christ.

In many of our churches, women effectively live in an environment of fear in which they have been taught to distrust their own instincts and desires, making it hard to report, or even acknowledge, the abuse.

For all our "empowered" rhetoric, women in this country aren't doing nearly as well as we'd like to think.

In 2009, George Sodini opened fire in a gym outside Pittsburgh, killing three women and injuring nine others. Investigators learned from Sodini's blog that he specifically targeted women.

Closer to home, in 2006, a gunman went into an Amish schoolhouse; sending the boys outside and opened fire on almost a dozen girls, killing five.

That same year in Colorado, a man sexually assaulted six female students he had taken hostage at a high school before killing one of them.

Three women are murdered every day by a current or former male partner in the U.S. And it's not just strangers who are killing women; more than 1,000 women were killed by their partners in 2005, and of all the women murdered in the United States, about a third are killed by a husband or boyfriend.

Jesus understood the consequences of the devaluation of people based on gender or social class..... In fact, it was the people who had traditionally

been rejected and devalued by the culture of His day that He directed His ministry.....tax collectors, women, the social outcasts of society of His day.

On one particular occasion, while traveling from Jerusalem in the south to Galilee in the north, Jesus and his disciples took the quickest route, through Samaria. Tired and thirsty, Jesus sat by Jacob's Well, while his disciples went ahead to the village of Sychar, about a half mile away, to buy food. It was about noon, the hottest part of the day, and a Samaritan woman came to the well at this inconvenient time, to draw water.

The Samaritans were a mixed race people, who had intermarried with the Assyrians centuries before. They were hated by the Jews because of this cultural mixing, and because they had their own version of the Bible and their own temple.

The woman at the well came to draw water at the hottest part of the day, instead of the usual morning or evening times, because she was shunned and rejected by the other women of the area for her immorality. Jesus knew her history but still accepted her and ministered to her.

In his encounter with the woman at the well, Jesus broke three Jewish customs: first, he spoke to a woman; second, she was a Samaritan woman, a group the Jews traditionally despised; and third, he asked her to get him a drink of water, which would have made him ceremonially unclean from using her cup or jar. This shocked the woman at the well.

In a culture where women were second class citizens and Samaritan women were especially devalued, Christ valued women and extended the same level of love and mercy as to anyone. Where value exists, there is love, kindness, mercy and grace.

Jesus, when asked by the religious leaders of his time about the greatest of all laws replied....

30 Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.' [a] 31 The second is this: 'Love your

neighbor as yourself.’ [b] There is no commandment greater than these.”

Paul the Apostle took the law of love and gave it a face.

In 1 Corinthians 13:4-8 he writes...

4 Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. 5 It does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. 6 Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. 7 It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.

8 Love never fails.

And to husbands Paul writes....

Husbands, love you wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, so that he might present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish.

In following Jesus’ example of demonstrating value for all people...and in keeping with the law of love, Still Waters Ministries operates under certain precepts dictating the manner in which we counsel and assist victims of domestic abuse.

- We reject patriarchy.....not in the idea of the Bible’s teaching on proper biblical responsibilities given to husbands and wives (such as in Eph 5). However, we do reject any teaching that presents a man as superior to a woman.
- The abuse victim is not to be blamed in any way for the abuse suffered. Statements such as “we are all sinners the same as the abuser” are unscriptural, false, and lay unjust burdens on abuse victims by what is called sin-leveling —raising the victim’s guilt and minimizing the evil of the abuser and his guilt.

- Biblical forgiveness does not require reconciliation of relationship with the offender. In cases of abuse, while the victim can forgive in the sense of not seeking personal vengeance, reconciliation of relationship is not required by God and it usually ends up being unsafe for the victim.
- Divorce for abuse is not only permitted by God, but blessed by Him. Divorce was given and permitted by God as a means of protection. The biblical institution and teachings surrounding marriage do not take priority over the safety of the individuals within it.
- As the church strives to help and protect the victim, we must ensure the victim's right to Christian liberty and resist the temptation to dictate and enforce church decisions upon the victim. We maintain the decision to separate from and divorce for reasons of abuse, is a matter of conscience for the victim.
- We hold to an informed pessimism regarding the potential for an abuser to change into a non-abuser, recognizing that abusers typically reject repentance and live a lie. (Read Insert Here) Genuine heart-change in an abuser is rare, and therefore we take great care to not give victims a false hope that their abuser is going to change for the better. We will do couples counseling, but only after seeing evidence of heart-change in the abuser...and only after the abused woman agrees to and is ready for such counseling.

Still Waters Ministries strongly believes in marriage and family. But as strongly as we believe in the sanctity of marriage and family, we believe equally in God's laws about His love for human life. We firmly believe His laws surrounding the sanctity of life and love supersede any laws concerning separation and divorce.

Working to rescue a troubled marriage is worth the effort. The ideal, whenever possible, is to help couples overcome normal and even serious marital conflict. We must not easily relinquish the goal of a restored, healthy, lifelong marriage for every couple.

However, the Word of God teaches us to listen not only to the letter of the law, but also to its intent. That is worth repeating. **The Word of God teaches us to listen not only to the letter of the law but also to its intent.**

God does not apply the strict letter of the law to any of us! Because Christ died in our place, God offers mercy rather than condemnation to all who come to Him in repentance and brokenness.

The consequence of the sin of abuse will often result in divorce. But, divorce is not the unforgiveable sin and was granted by God as a means of protection. We can and do agree divorce reflects a serious and costly departure from God's original design. But the solution to the problem is not found in misrepresenting the heart of the law or in ignoring the plight of unloved or abused wives. We cannot and should not, in good conscious, rightly maintain that sexual unfaithfulness and the desertion of an unbelieving mate are the only grounds for a divorce.

We agree abusive husbands can find forgiveness from God— even if they have lost their marriage. Such mercy is also available to those who have put more value on the law of marriage than on the people the law of marriage was made to protect.

It is the very heart and soul of Still Waters Ministries and the Lilies of the Valley to work hard for reconciliation when warranted.

But, we also remain diligent with regard to the physical, emotional and spiritual health and welfare of abused women.

And, we will not compromise our position of zero tolerance of the physical, mental and emotional abuse of women.

In my office, I surround myself with a number of objects that serve as reminders of Christ and of His Word.

I keep these objects on the bookshelves in my office to remind me that God has given His word to help me live and experience His best Story and....to remember that story in the manner I counsel those who pass through the doors of my office so they, too, might be able to experience His best Story as well.

One of those objects is a Back Pack. It reminds me that many people walk around with heavy burdens and God has called me to carry one another's burdens.

Galatians 6:2 says "Carry each other's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ."

There is a story of a king from long ago that had twin sons. Back then the first born was the heir to the throne but there was some confusion about which one was actually born first. As they grew up, the king tried to figure out a fair way to designate one of them as crown prince. Everyone thought the boys were equal in intelligence, strength, and character. But the king thought he recognized a particular quality in just one of them.

One day the king called them to the throne room. He said, "My sons, the day will come when one of you must succeed me as king. The burdens of sovereignty are very heavy.

To find out which of you is better able to bear them cheerfully, I am sending you together to a far corner of the kingdom. One of my advisors there will place equal burdens on your shoulders. My crown will one day go to the one who first returns bearing his burden like a king should."

In a spirit of friendly competition, the brothers set out together. Soon they came across an elderly woman struggling under a burden that seemed far too heavy for her frail body. One of the boys suggested that they stop to help her. The other protested: "We have a burden of our own to worry about. Let us be on our way."

The one boy hurried on while the other stayed behind to give aid to the old lady. As he continued on his journey, he continually found others who needed help. There was a blind man that took him miles out of his way and a lame man that slowed him way down.

Eventually, he did reach his father's advisor, where he received his own burden and started home with it safely on his shoulders. When he arrived at

the palace, his brother met him at the gate, and greeted him with dismay. He said, "I don't understand. I told our father the burden was too heavy to carry. However did you do it?"

The future king replied thoughtfully, "I suppose when I helped others carry their burdens, I found the strength to carry my own."

Although the author of that story is unknown it is a good illustration for how we as Christians should live our lives. I could even imagine Jesus using a parable like that with his followers even. Definitely his followers learned this principle from him.

The burden of domestic violence and abuse is a heavy one. It is one that cannot and must not be carried alone. Every struggle and every burden can be overcome, but it cannot be done alone. As church leaders, we have the high calling to LEAD THROUGH ABUSE. We have been called to lighten the heavy burden carried by the victims of abuse and domestic violence. God can and will provide the strength and the means needed to help lighten the burden carried by the victims of domestic violence.

This Back Pack reminds me that people sometimes carry heavy burdens. And the "heavies" of life, especially those carried by the victims of domestic violence...ought not be carried alone. It is a complicated.....messy.....heavy and impossible burden when carried alone. But, together as a church family.....if you.....and you....and you....and you....and you come alongside to help carry that burden, then the burden will not seem so great.