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Churches called to aid abused women

Susan A. wanted badly to have her daughter baptized in the Catholic Church, so she planned carefully. First, she went grocery shopping and left some canned goods hidden in her car. Then she estimated the amount of time she would need to talk to the priest. Finally, one day she told her husband she was going shopping.

She drove to the church where she had been baptized when she was single. The pastor was out, but, she said, "One of the sisters was in her office. I hadn't thought about what to say. I started to cry."

Shaking and sobbing, she poured out the story of her terrifying situation and told of being beaten.

"She said to me, 'What are you doing here?'" Susan recalled. "I said I wanted to get my daughter baptized, and when I try to talk to my husband about it, I get punished."

The woman religious said, "My advice to you is to go home and talk it over with him. Love your husband more. And come back when you both can be here."

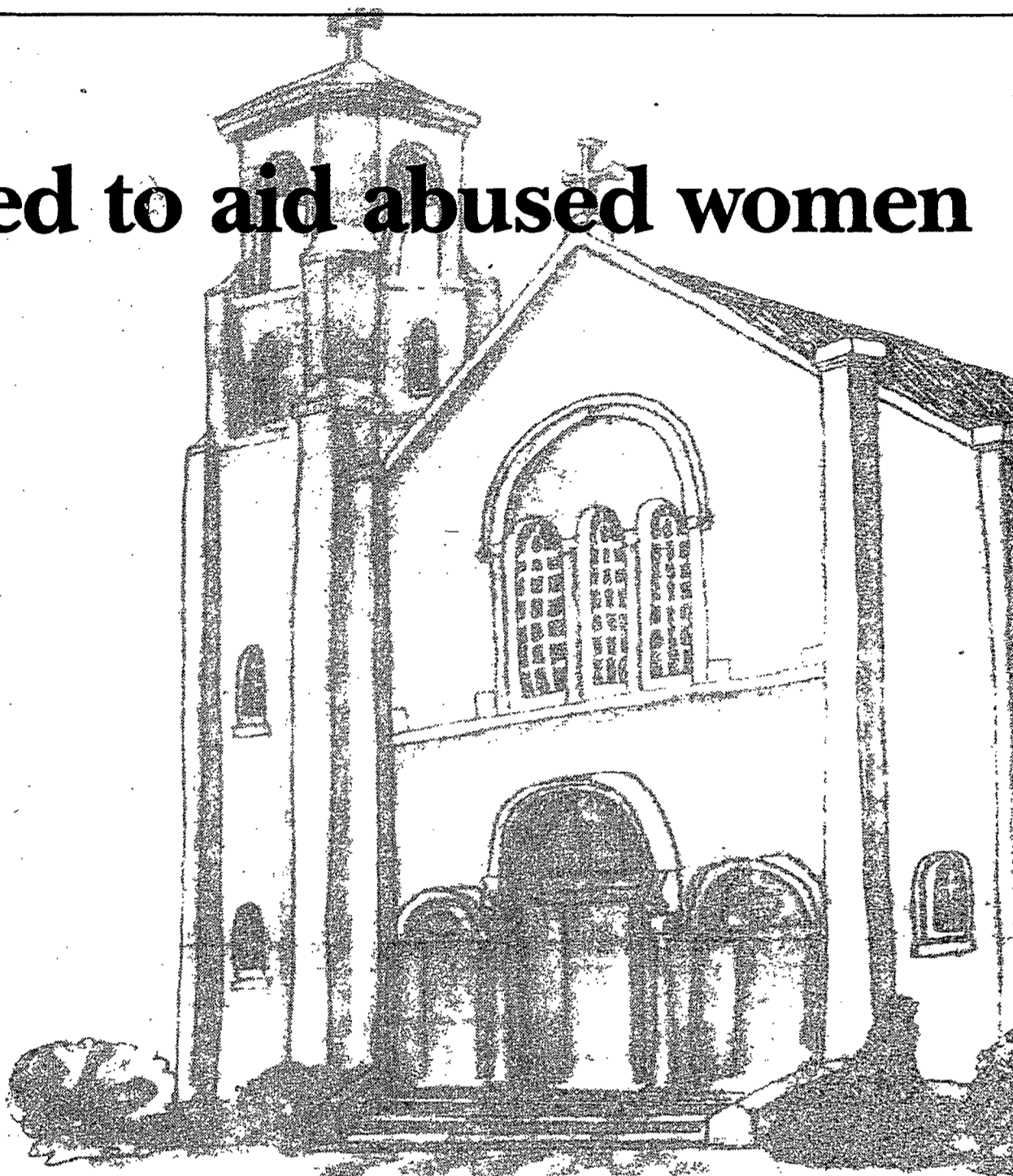
Susan cried most of the way home until she realized she had to look presentable. She feared her husband would be suspicious.

During the ensuing three or four years the violence continued. He would pull her out of bed by her hair and have their daughter watch him beat her, and he struck her repeatedly with a gun while she was pregnant with their second child. She finally left him for good in 1989, after several tries.

Awareness of the domestic violence Susan and other women and men face has heightened in recent years thanks to efforts by such groups as Alternatives for Battered Women. The recent attention on O.J. Simpson and the battering of Nicole Brown Simpson, and on President Bill Clinton's public accounts of his mother being beaten have also increased awareness.

Officials of Alternatives for Battered Women say every 15 seconds a woman in the United States is beaten by an intimate partner. And just as it took Susan several attempts to break away, counselors say it takes most battered women seven attempts to leave for good.

As an ABW counselor herself today, Susan hears of many such beatings. (She also receives threats because of her work and prefers to remain anonymous.) After her abuse in Florida, she returned to her



native New York state, where she found understanding at a Syracuse Catholic church before moving to the Rochester area. She and other intervenors know that clergy and other counselors often still encourage battered women to stay with their abusers and to keep the family together — even when it's just not safe.

Nonetheless, ABW is turning to the clergy for help. For the first time, ABW presented a panel of interfaith clergy, including Bishop Matthew H. Clark, at its third conference for professionals on domestic violence, held Monday, Oct. 16, at the Rochester Riverside Convention Center.

Bishop Clark used the moment to discuss the U.S. bishops' 1992 pastoral response on domestic violence against women — a practical and informative guide on the issue. In a later interview with the *Courier*, Bishop Clark said, "It is incumbent on society and church to be honest and be aware of the problem and be as supportive as they can possibly be. ...There is no magic to solving it; it takes involvement and commitment by a whole range of people."

The conference included legal, mental health, and health care experts, too. Referring to this year's inclusion of clergy, ABW's assistant director Nancy Nealon, a parishioner at Our Lady Queen of Peace Church, said, "Clergy can play a tremendous role in stopping family violence. We want to be able to do more with clergy and get everyone possible involved."

Among the first to work with ABW to develop a clergy advisory committee is the Rev. James Poling, professor of pastoral theology and counseling at Colgate Rochester Divinity School.

"Some things the churches traditionally say to people endanger women further," he acknowledged. But he maintains that clergy and other church people are

educated; they just need much more training, and that is his first goal. Eventually he'd like to see choir directors, Christian education directors, teachers and others people in leadership roles be trained.

Second, he hopes to spread positive stories about church and other community leaders.

"What the community doesn't know is that women and some men (abuse survivors) all over the community already are making incredible contributions because of what they've learned about themselves and (about how God works) in their lives," Rev. Poling said. But, he added, society attaches too much stigma for them to speak freely.

From her own experience, Joan Ann Kirkeby-Prosser understands why other victims don't speak out. But that doesn't stop the chaplain at Monroe Community College from talking openly to students about her own suffering as a battered wife.

"I think it is a gift from God," said Kirkeby-Prosser, who is Catholic. "I am able to share that I was abused by a spouse, and am able to share that I have one daughter who was raped when she was 12, and another who was a victim of child molestation."

"I realize how important it is for others to know," she added.

Kirkeby-Prosser was a battered wife for five years in the 1960s.

"I prayed to God and the Blessed Mother every day to be a better wife and find a way to make this man happy," Kirkeby-Prosser recalled. "This is what the church taught me in school. I still remember hearing over and over again the wife had to please the husband. The father is the king of the family, the mother is the queen and had to keep the father

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