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Elder Abuse and Faith

Building Community Partnerships to Support  
Faith-Affiliated Older Survivors of Abuse

Safe Havens Interfaith Partnership  
Against Domestic Violence and Elder Abuse

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Today's Presenters

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## Partners in this Work

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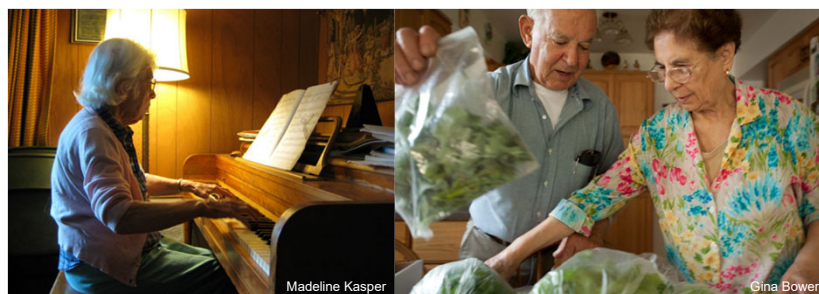
National Clearinghouse on  
Abuse in Later Life

[www.ncall.us](http://www.ncall.us)

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## Honoring Older Survivors

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Have you worked with older adults for whom faith was critically important?

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## Building a Common Language


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- ❖ Faith leader
- ❖ Faith/religion/spirituality/beliefs
- ❖ Advocate/service provider
- ❖ Victim/survivor/congregant/client
- ❖ Jargon, acronyms, and “insider” language
- ❖ Vocabulary that supports an interfaith, ecumenical, multi-religious movement

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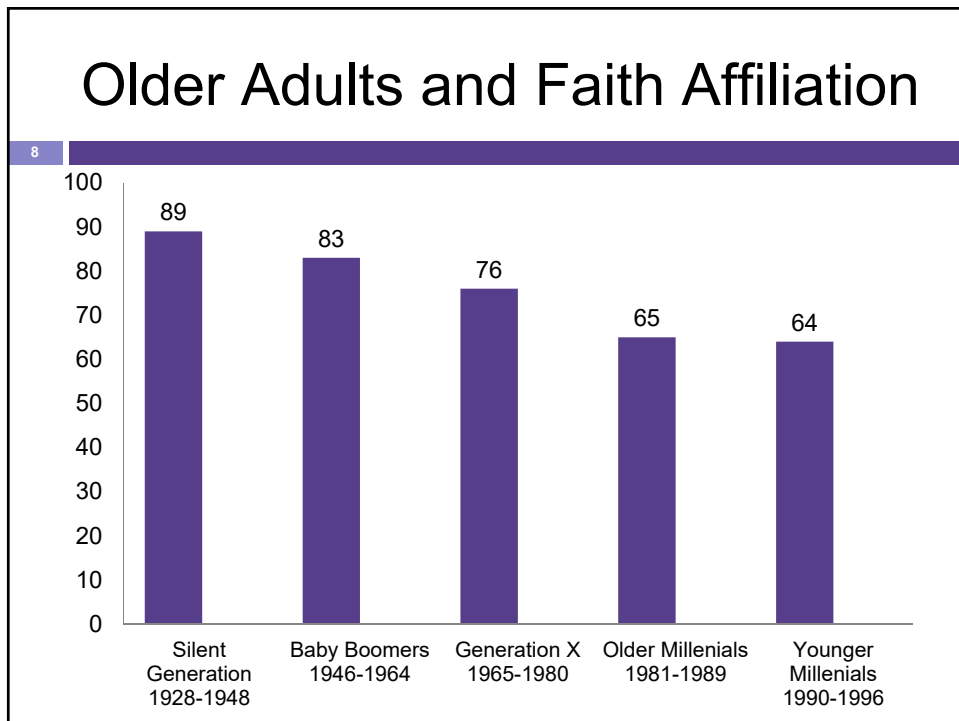
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## Older Adults and Faith



The slide features three photographs. The first shows a young man, an older man, and a young boy smiling together. The second shows an older couple sitting and smiling. The third shows a woman in a red shirt holding a large red ball, with another person in the background also holding a red ball.

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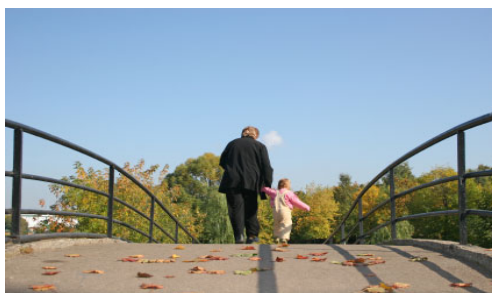


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## Religious Affiliation of Americans by Race

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- ❖ Black: 82%
- ❖ Latin@: 80%
- ❖ White: 76%



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“Religious affiliation is the most common form of organizational participation among older adults, with 50% reporting attending services weekly.”



American Psychological Association,  
Older Adults' Health and Age-Related Changes:  
Demographic, Economic, and Social Issues.

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## Forms of Elder Abuse

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- ❖ Physical Abuse
- ❖ Emotional/Psychological/Verbal Abuse
- ❖ Sexual Abuse
- ❖ Neglect
- ❖ Financial Exploitation
- ❖ Spiritual Abuse

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## Spiritual Abuse

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“What comes to your mind  
when you hear “spiritual abuse?”

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## Faith: A Significant Resource



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“Religion” from Latin “religare” to connect, to bind.

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## In the midst of isolation . . .

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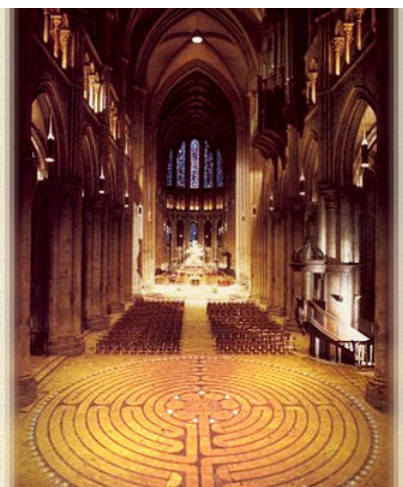
Religion, spirituality, or faith connects older victims and survivors to . . .

- ❖ Community and traditions
- ❖ Language and memories
- ❖ Family and culture
- ❖ History and country of origin
- ❖ Core identity, values, and beliefs
- ❖ Source of strength and courage
- ❖ Creator, G-d, Great Spirit, Higher Power



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## In the midst of confusion and chaos . . .



Faith, religion, or spirituality can provide the structure that helps survivors of elder abuse re-orient themselves, find their bearings, stay centered in their values and identity.

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## In the midst of loss and grief . . .

- ❖ Faith, religion, or spirituality may provide resources that faith-based survivors carry with them that no one can take away.
- ❖ Faith, religion, or spirituality may help survivors who are faithful grieve the losses.



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## Spiritual Connection

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Older survivors of abuse tell us that a spiritual connection is critical to their identity, their decision making, and their healing.



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## Spiritual Suffering

“What has been most violated . . . are intangibles: love, faith, trust, and hope. The result is spiritual suffering, and a serious sense of loss and powerlessness.”

Older survivor of abuse, 2009



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Not all older survivors identify with a particular faith or tradition.

However, many survivors identify spiritual as well as mental and physical needs.

All survivors need someone to bear witness to the story, someone to accompany them on the journey toward safety, justice, and healing.

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Older survivors and victims of abuse are likely to turn to their faith communities for help.

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Have you worked with faith leaders who were helpful in supporting an older adult?

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“An Ontario study of the shelter needs of older Canadian women found that older women would seek help from a place of worship if they experienced abuse.”



Elizabeth Podnieks, EdD, RN and Sue Wilson, PhD,  
 “Elder Abuse Awareness in Faith Communities:  
 Findings from a Canadian Pilot Study,”  
 Journal of Elder Abuse and Neglect,  
 Vol. 15, No.3/4, 2003, p. 123.

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“Respondents, especially minorities, often indicated that **their ‘first stop’ would be a member of the clergy** if they were to discuss their DV with anyone.”

Many women felt that **they would be likely to seek the help they need in their places of worship.**”

Richard Beaulaurier, Laura Seff, and Frederick Newman,  
 “Barriers to Help-Seeking for Older Women Who Experience  
 Intimate Partner Violence: A Descriptive Model,”  
 Journal of Women and Aging, Vol. 20(3/4) 2008

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“More than many other formal care providers, faith leaders are in a position to identify, assess, and intervene in abusive situations because they see older people in their own context over time, and have ongoing access to their residences.”



Elizabeth Podnieks, 2003

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## Faith community members and leaders . . .

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- ❖ know older members of community
- ❖ know individuals across time
- ❖ know families across generations
- ❖ visit in homes, hospitals, long-term care and assisted living facilities, rehabilitation hospitals, nursing homes
- ❖ provide ongoing worship opportunities in nursing homes and assisted living facilities
- ❖ are already trusted confidantes and important gatekeepers



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## A Significant Opportunity

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“The paucity of studies that look at elder abuse in religious communities speaks to the presence of a significant gap in our understanding of elder abuse . . . this important social support for seniors is not well tapped.”

Elizabeth Podnieks, EdD, RN and Sue Wilson, PhD,  
“Elder Abuse Awareness in Faith Communities:  
Findings from a Canadian Pilot Study,”  
Journal of Elder Abuse and Neglect,  
Vol. 15, No.3/4, 2003, p. 125.

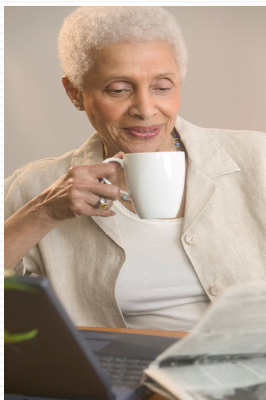
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Have you worked with faith leaders who were not helpful in supporting an older adult?

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## Faith: Identifying the Gaps



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## Without training and resources . . .

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- ❖ Denial
- ❖ Silencing
- ❖ Blaming and judging
- ❖ Minimization
- ❖ Unsafe solutions and “quick fixes”
- ❖ Manipulation by abuser
- ❖ Couple’s or marriage counseling
- ❖ Dead end



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“I told my priest about the  
abuse 27 years ago.

He told me  
to pray harder.

Now I have calluses on my  
knees and my husband  
still beats me.”

Older survivor, 1986

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“I turned the other cheek,  
and turned the other cheek,  
until I ran out of faces.”

Survivor, 1985

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“The thing we most want clergy to do is listen. It takes so much energy, strength, and courage to speak up. When a victim is ready to speak, clergy HAVE to listen. Clergy shouldn’t say, ‘we’re out of time,’ or ‘I have a meeting.’”



Older survivor, 2009

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“One look [from a faith leader] that says, ‘I don’t want to hear this, or ‘I don’t believe you’ will shut a victim down for another 20 years.”

Older survivor, 2009

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## Faith leaders can . . .

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- ❖ RECOGNIZE
- ❖ RESPOND
- ❖ REFER
- ❖ REACH OUT



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With training and partnerships, a faith leader or member of a congregation could provide . . .

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- ❖ Safe, compassionate, and confidential listening
- ❖ Acknowledgement of the abuse and trauma
- ❖ Assurance that the victim is not to blame
- ❖ Theological and spiritual support
- ❖ Material support
- ❖ Community connections and referrals



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## Additional Roles for Faith Leaders

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- ❖ Intervention
- ❖ Prevention
- ❖ Long-term social change
- ❖ Accountability
- ❖ Community leadership



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## Next Steps for Faith Leaders

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- ❖ Learn more
- ❖ Break the silence
- ❖ Gather resources
- ❖ Support survivors
- ❖ Build partnerships
- ❖ Provide information
- ❖ Speak out against elder abuse



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# Mandatory Reporting

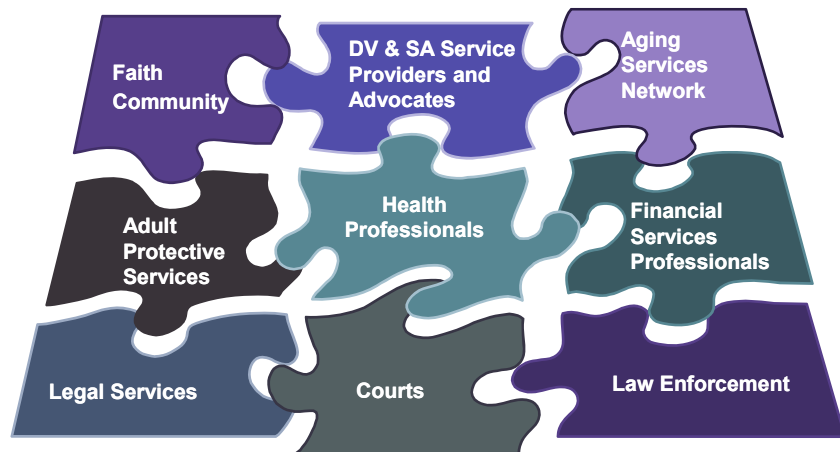
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# Building Community Partnerships

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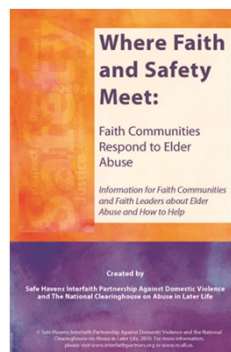


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## Elder Abuse and Faith Toolkit

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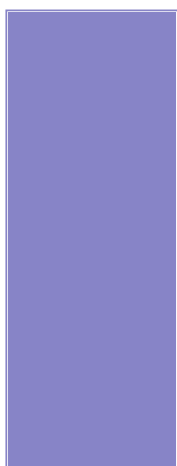
- ❖ *Where Faith and Safety Meet Toolkit and Partnership Guide*
- ❖ Handouts
- ❖ For more information
  - ❖ [www.interfaithpartners.org](http://www.interfaithpartners.org)
  - ❖ [www.ncall.us](http://www.ncall.us)



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## Ram Dass

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We're all going to the same place, and we're all on a path. Sometimes our paths converge. Sometimes they separate, and we can hardly see each other, much less hear each other. But on the good days, we're walking on the same path, close together, and we're walking each other home.

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What are your ideas for strengthening partnerships between APS staff and faith leaders and congregations?

Do you have concrete examples?

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## Strengthening Relationships between Faith Leaders and Adult Protective Services

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- ❖ Building Trust
- ❖ Developing a Common Language
- ❖ Learning Roles
- ❖ Sharing Skills
- ❖ Partnering to Support Older Adults
- ❖ Community Resources and Education
- ❖ Moving the Conversation Forward

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## Contact Information

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## Thank You!



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