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A Tampa pastor works to set domestic violence survivors free

Getting divorced would be worse than staying in a dangerous marriage, he was told. He's changing that narrative based on his own experiences.



Ericka Iglesias pins a domestic violence awareness ribbon onto Pastor Michael Neely ahead of a presentation at his church. (LUIS SANTANA | Times)

BY LAUREN PEACE

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The pastor's story begins in Chicago, with a dad who beat his sons black and blue but made them promise to never lay hands on a woman.

When the pastor grew up and married a girl with a sweet face and bubbling rage, there was an air of familiarity that, perhaps, muddled his understanding of abuse.

More than that, there was the advice of his church elders the first time he showed up bleeding: "Stay and pray."

This was a spiritual fight, they told him, not a reason for divorce. And so Michael Neely, then in his late 20s and with dreams of leading a congregation of his own, stayed.

When he was slashed with a kitchen knife, Neely threw himself deeper into Bible study. When insults were spat and scissors were thrown and lighter fluid was poured on the Christmas tree, he learned to make himself small until tensions settled.

It took a long time for him to use the word abuse. He is not the image of survivors typically plastered on posters. He is a Black man with a towering frame whose voice booms when he reads Sunday scripture, a people-person with a movie star smile. And so he wrestled

quietly with this contradiction of faith. How could a church that fights for the unborn not fight with equal vigor for the people in its pews? Would a merciful God want this?

“Stay and pray,” the elders repeated.

Breaking free

Faith can be a lifeline. It’s a source of healing and hope. But abusers can also weaponize it to keep victims in dangerous relationships. That’s especially true if religious leaders counsel victims to repair it rather than escape.

It’s hard to measure just how much religion plays a role in domestic violence, said Mandy Truong, a public health and policy scholar based in Australia. Cultures vary drastically, religion to religion, denomination to denomination, so survivors’ experiences vary, too. Taboos around family violence within some faith communities mean it’s likely underreported.

As a little boy, Neely would give sermons standing on milk crates in the backyard. On his way to becoming a pastor in his 40s, he couldn’t bear the idea of being barred from ministry. Divorce might close that door.

As his life was spinning out in Tampa, he flew back to Chicago to visit family. The longer he was away, the more he shed the tension that had built with every blow. If he wanted to keep this peace, Neely remembers his older brother telling him, he should end his marriage. His brother was a missionary and a role model in their faith. It was the permission Neely had been seeking for more than a decade.

When the pastor filed the paperwork after 17 years, there was a sign above the counter that read “divorce,” like a final warning, and he almost turned away.

Then he heard God’s voice beckoning him free.

A spiritual awakening

Two years after that, in 2003, Neely was leading Bible study at a Tampa church he’d talked into hiring him as an assistant pastor when a woman raised her hand.

What does God say about abuse and divorce?

A thick silence hung over the chapel.

He’d shared his story privately with the senior pastor but still felt it was a mark of shame. Now there were 150 people before him, and he was shaky in the knees.

Until death do us part does not mean until my spouse kills me, he answered slowly. God does not want you to be abused.

Abuse violates the sanctity of marriage, he went on. Domestic violence destroys that sanctity, he said, his courage building. When churches encourage victims to stay, it diminishes all that God intended marriage to be. Filing for divorce is just a way of burying something already dead.

The next day, Neely was seated in his modest office when his phone began to ring. Over a few hours, he fielded calls from 18 women who had been in attendance. Fourteen had been sitting next to their abuser.

They were Christian. They were married. They were being beaten by their spouses, and they were staying on the advice of spiritual leaders, they told him.

He began counseling survivors, first over the phone, then in person.

There was the woman whose face was so swollen from beatings, she could hardly make eye contact.

Another had contemplated suicide because ending her life felt more bearable than ending her marriage.

There was the woman who told Neely she'd cried tears of joy at her husband's funeral because she'd been praying for his death for years.

'God forgive me'

On a Thursday night this October, the doors to the pastor's church are open, and people are trickling in.

"Hi, welcome. Would you like a pin?" Ericka Iglesias asks a woman in a T-shirt and jeans. The woman smiles and takes the purple ribbon tacked to angel wings.

"I'm just here to learn," she says, as she fiddles with the clasp. "I got a niece right now; she's dating a dangerous man. She's always calling me crying. I tried to pick her up, but she wouldn't come."

Iglesias nods, her mouth tightening.

Not long ago, Iglesias, too, had been married to a dangerous man. But she feared the end of her marriage more.

She is 50, with tanned skin and almond eyes. If she got divorced, a preacher once told her, God would take her blessings away. She feared ending up alone.

Then Iglesias met Pastor Neely.

Tonight, he stands at the front of the room, dressed in purple satin.

“Good evening,” Neely said. “Welcome to Thursday night live, an up close and personal look at domestic violence. Our motto is ‘God and abuse cannot coexist.’”

Word had spread quickly, all those years ago, of the pastor you could turn to for guidance. Clandestine meetings grew until they were no longer secrets but a vital part of Neely’s spiritual work.

Today, he’s a go-to person among domestic violence responders, a trusted chaplain to resource centers that regularly work with people seeking spiritual support. It’s how Iglesias got in touch with him in 2018.

“He talked with me and prayed with me, and it really broke some chains in my heart,” Iglesias said.

On this night, in his church, survivors were sharing their stories.

A woman with a sugary voice took the mic and described the night she awoke in the hospital after the man she loved strangled her unconscious.

“I’m not innocent,” she said, holding back tears. “God forgive me for praying for him to be locked up. I was hoping and praying that he would get put in jail because at least that would give me a chance.”

Neely turned to her.

“You said earlier that you were to blame. That you were at fault somehow. And then I heard you say, ‘God forgive me for wanting him in jail,’” the pastor began.

Domestic violence, he told her, is not just physical. Reality starts to bend.

“You should not feel guilty,” he said. “Because if he ended up there, it was due to his behavior. To his criminal acts. To his abuse of you. You simply were the vehicle that called the police.”

When another woman, with a voice like a whisper, described the night her husband beat her as she held their child, tears spilled down her face.

“My dream was always to end up with one person, the love of my life,” the woman said. “I couldn’t accept that my marriage was failing.”

The pastor leaned in. He understood.

“Malachi 2:16. God hates divorce. It’s right there in print,” the pastor said. “Unfortunately, the church has held it up in neon lights. I don’t think God intended for it to be in neon lights.”

He went on: “The day I signed my divorce papers was one of the happiest days in my life. You’re not supposed to say that in a church, because ‘God hates divorce.’ Well, he didn’t hate it that day.”

Bible to the heavens

When Neely thinks back on more than two decades of work, the memory he holds closest comes from one of the first women to call.

She was the wife of a church employee; someone the pastor had known well. But she confided in her being beaten since their wedding night. Now, in her 40s, she saw a chance. She called with a plan.

He arrived at her home, just a mile from the church, in jeans and sneakers, ready to pack boxes. But as he lifted a piece of furniture to the U-Haul, the woman stopped him.

She had nephews, she said, who could help with the lifting. She needed the pastor to be a pastor. Had he brought his Bible?

Of course he had.

She’d been reading the story of Moses and Pharaoh, she told him, when Moses held his Bible to the sky and parted the thrashing sea so the Israelites could escape.

Now, she wanted him to be Moses, to stand on her porch with his Bible stretched toward the heavens.

“I know it sounds strange, but that’s the only way I’m going to feel safe enough to leave,” he remembers.

And so, the pastor stood as the family moved boxes of kitchen supplies and clothes and held his Bible to the sky until there was nothing left to pack. Before getting in her car, the woman turned to him a final time and asked him to promise that God wanted her to be safe.

Decades later, Neely could still hear the sound of her voice fading as she drove away, windows down.

A woman crying out, “I’m free!”

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