

From personal pain, book of wisdom

Greenhills School graduate Ionica Coleman's book *The Dinah Project: A Handbook for Congregational Response to Sexual Violence* drew on her own history to advise congregations how to address difficult issues. **Religion section, page 10**



Church's silence deepens a wound

Rape survivor gives guidance on helpful ways churches can respond to sexual violence

BY CATHERINE O'DONNELL
News Staff Reporter

When Monica Coleman was 21 and a theology student at Vanderbilt University, a seminary student raped her. The young woman, who grew up in Ann Arbor, had nearly always felt safe in the world, but the assault banished those feelings.

Coleman told three pastors what happened. The first watched television while she was talking, the second asked why she allowed the man in her apartment and the third told her to get over her depression.

Not until she told a fourth pastor was Coleman finally heard.

She wound up joining that pastor's church, Metropolitan Interdenominational of Nashville, and worked there as a pastoral assistant. She also continued psychological counseling as well as legal action against her attacker. But she believed God had ignored the rape.

Not until she had talked and cried and helped organize a worship service about sexual violence could Coleman fully allow God back in her life.

The service was an initial part of *The Dinah Project*, a mix of community education, worship and group counseling. Coleman and a team of volunteers invented the project over three years, and she's recently written a



Monica Coleman, right, greets Ann Arbor Public Schools Superintendent George Fornero while signing copies of her book "The Dinah Project" Saturday at Bethel AME Church.

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book about it: "The Dinah Project: A Handbook for Congregational Response to Sexual Violence." (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, \$23).

In the Bible's Book of Genesis, Dinah is the daughter of Jacob and Leah raped by Shechem, a prince of the region. Her family exacts murderous revenge, but nowhere in the Genesis account is the young woman's voice actually heard.

Coleman wants such voices heard and understood. Her 177-page paperback is a step-by-step primer on assembling information about sexual violence, educating faith communities, and bringing concerns about sexual violence to worship services.

The latter chapters of the book deal with evil and forgiveness. "As far as I was concerned, God abandoned me when I needed God the most,"

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writes Coleman. Two years went by before she decided God hadn't simply ignored her rape, that indeed, he grieved the rapist's actions and the effects on the victim. "And there are some things you can't get back. You can never get back that feeling of safety," said Coleman in an interview before preaching last Sunday's sermon at her home

church, Bethel AME on Ann Arbor's northeast side.

"Sexual violence causes all of us to rethink what we know about sexuality, safety, God, and forgiveness," explained Coleman. The problem, she said, is that ministers and their congregations often dodge sexual issues, particularly those involving assault. People often don't know what to say or do, so they say nothing. "Because silence is a response of tolerance," writes Coleman in the book, "the church must respond."

A number of area congregations have instituted measures to prevent sexual abuse, particularly among children, but extensive, congregation-wide responses to victims of sexual violence are apparently more rare.

Bethlehem United Church of Christ, on South Fourth Avenue in Ann Arbor, has a system for

preventing sexual assault, particularly intended for church members who work with children. But it has no organized program for victims.

"I think it's a great idea, a next step," said Associate Pastor Deborah Schueneman. Asked how often she encounters victims of sexual violence, Schueneman said, "Too often. ... And it has profound implications for the persons' relationships with God. They feel shame before God, and I have to help them overcome inappropriate guilt."

"A church response is attentive to our Dinahs," writes Coleman. "We need to ask our Dinahs what they want, what they need."

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Monica A. Coleman

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Book: "The Dinah Project: A Handbook for Congregational Response to Sexual Violence" (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 2004). Available locally at Shaman Drum Book Shop.