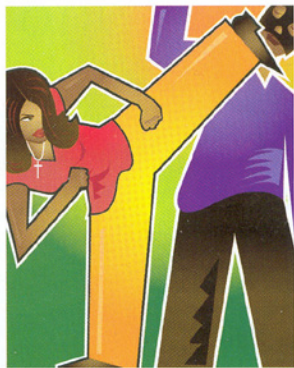


rear view fighting back

A MINISTER WHO IS RAPED REGAINS HER FAITH BY TEACHING CHURCHES HOW TO HELP OTHER VICTIMS BY MONICA A. COLEMAN



Statistics say that one in four girls will be sexually assaulted or raped before she turns 18. One in six boys and one in 12 men will suffer the same. I will never forget the day that I became one of those numbers. The moment my ex-boyfriend raped me, my world fell apart. I took a shower. I didn't call the police. I thought I could go on with life as normal. But it took all my energy just to get up in the morning and eat breakfast. I could barely match my clothes. I continued to ask myself what had I done to deserve this.

As I slowly pulled my life together, there were legal personnel to help me pursue avenues of justice. There were medical personnel to address my physical health. I found therapists to help me work through the emotions. But there was no one to address the questions I could not answer: Why didn't God stop him? Why didn't God hear my prayers? Didn't I have enough faith? Why did God let this happen to me? I didn't know if I should be angry with God for being raped, or thankful for surviving the attack. And at the end of every day, there was no one to teach me how to pray again.

The first minister I told listened to me while watching a baseball game on the television behind me. The second pastor in whom I confided asked, "Well, what was he doing in your apartment anyway?" I went home convinced that the rape was my fault. The third pastor said that depression was a tool of the enemy and that I should cast it out in the name of Jesus. I cast and cast, and I was still an emotional wreck. Every time I turned to ministers, I went home in more pain than I'd been in before I sought their counsel. If I had not been a minister myself, I probably would have left the church altogether. As a minister, I knew how to go through the motions of liturgy and preaching, but I wanted to feel God again.

I decided to create my own ritual—invite a couple of friends over and ask them to pray for me. This small idea turned into a community effort committed to talking

about sexual violence in the church. I heard dozens of stories from other churchgoers who had experienced the same pain that I had. I talked to other ministers about how they could better counsel people in their churches. I gave seminars to social workers about how important it is to address the spiritual crisis involved in sexual assault. I wanted other victims to have the resources that I hadn't had.

Through worship, community education and counseling, the Dinah Project, named for Joseph's daughter whose rape is recorded in Genesis 31, organizes a church response to sexual violence. After several years, the Dinah Project has taken on a life bigger than I or the church in which it is founded. The Dinah Project made the difference between having an empty spiritual life and including God in my healing process. It made the difference between the skepticism of ministers, and a belief that the church can be a safe place for those who have experienced sexual violence. The Dinah Project helped me to see beyond my own pain to the larger community that also desires healing, compassion and safety.

I came to realize that my experiences were not some conspired acts of malice that the church had against me and all other victims of sexual violence. The church just didn't know what to do. Like most of society, the church thinks of rape as a women's issue or a legal issue. They recommend counseling and ignore the very real ways in which rape makes its victims question both themselves and God. Sexual activity makes churches uncomfortable, and they forget that sexual violence is a crime of power. It's a crime against the body and the soul. **✝**



An ordained elder in the A.M.E. church, Monica A. Coleman (www.MonicaAColeman.com) is a doctoral student in religion and the author of *The Dinah Project: A Congregational Response to Sexual Violence* (Pilgrim Press), to be released in May.