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## Facing Reality

“Pastors tend to ignore domestic violence if they can. Having been a pastor before I became a chaplain, I understand why, remembering my own discomfort. I felt unsure of what to do and fearful of making a bad situation worse. It was so easy to do nothing.”

—**The Rev. Kathryn Willoughby Weed,**

Presbyterian Church (USA), Chaplain, Saint Francis Hospital,  
Charleston, West Virginia

One of our vital tasks as spiritual leaders is to address the situations of domestic violence occurring throughout our congregations and communities. It needs to begin with our reaching consensus on three basic principles of human rights, social welfare, and theological understanding:

1. No one deserves to be abused, and no one has the right to abuse another.

2. The top priority of any prevention or intervention strategy needs to be safety for victims and survivors and full accountability for violators.
  
3. God, Jesus Christ, the Bible, and church doctrine offer no excuses or justifications for this kind of abuse; in fact, they all condemn domestic violence.<sup>1</sup>

If we can all agree on the above principles, there is great potential that we will be able to contribute significantly to the prevention and elimination of domestic violence in every segment of society.

Achieving consensus will also help us continue to collaborate even when we face cultural, political, racial, social, and theological differences. These often arise and divide us when discussing domestic violence and its impact on our congregations and communities. Belief systems are an essential part of our lives. However, if we can agree that domestic violence contributes nothing positive to individuals and overall society, and it brings devastation primarily upon women and children and destroys families and robs victims, survivors, and perpetrators of human dignity, then we are much more apt to focus our collective energies on ending the abuse rather than being distracted by those issues about which we differ.

Establishing and maintaining solid partnerships with each other and a host of community service providers will help us deal effectively with the harsh reality of domestic violence in all of our communities of faith.

Let us turn to some of the key issues. Subsequent chapters will address them in greater depth.

*Defining the problem*—Domestic violence is a pattern of abusive behavior in which a person uses coercion, deception, harassment, humiliation, manipulation, and/or force in order to establish and maintain power and control over an intimate partner or former intimate partner.

*Tactics used*—Perpetrators use economic, emotional, psychological, physical, sexual, spiritual, and/or verbal tactics to get their way. These tactics include, but are not limited to dictating how their victims dress, the people to whom they can and cannot relate, what they can and cannot say or think, and when they can and cannot study, work, and worship. Perpetrators might also refer to victims with such degrading and vulgar terms as “bitch,” “slut,” and “whore”; threaten to kill themselves, their victims, and/or the victims’ family, friends, caregivers, and pets; and destroy items meaningful to victims, such as books, jewelry, heirlooms, photos, and other property.

*Scope and prevalence of domestic violence*—Domestic violence occurs in all cultures, ethnicities, races, religions, and socioeconomic classes. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention’s Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System (BRFSS) reports that in 2006 almost one in three women suffered physical abuse in their adult lifetime. This alarming statistic does not include many of the emotional, psychological, and spiritual tactics male perpetrators use to abuse their female victims.<sup>2</sup>

*Causes*—Domestic violence is caused by the conscious decision and willful choice of perpetrators to use abusive tactics. The violators’ goal is to get what they want, when they want it. The problem is not caused by alcohol or other drugs, or by children, job stress, psychological illness, pets, Satan, or, especially, the violated women. Perpetrators

believe they are entitled, often by some alleged religious or spiritual “truth,” to demand their way.

*Getting help*—Women of faith will most often turn first to clergy, other pastoral ministers, and fellow congregants for help when victimized by domestic abusers. Spiritual leaders and laity need to be willing to receive appropriate education and training in domestic violence intervention and prevention strategies and be willing to partner with existing domestic violence service providers in their communities in order to help victims-survivors and perpetrators in their midst.

### **“It Doesn’t Happen Here!”**

One of the most challenging aspects of helping clergy and other pastoral ministers enhance their pastoral skills on this topic is the fact that some deny the problem exists within their congregations. Here are just a few of the hundreds of reasons spiritual leaders have cited as to why they’ve allowed this global problem to pass them by:

- ◆ “Any abusive man who sat one time under the authority of my preaching would be convicted by the Holy Spirit and stop all that nonsense.” (Male pastor, Illinois)
- ◆ “I pastor a feminist congregation. All the men who worship with us know my ardent stance against violence.” (Female pastor, California)

- ◆ “I serve in a rural white area. Domestic violence is a problem primarily among people of color.” (Male pastor, South Dakota)
- ◆ “There are no Micronesians in our congregation. They have a major problem with domestic violence; we don’t.” (Male pastor, Hawaii)
- ◆ “Our women have a pretty good grasp on reality. They’ve been trained by me to stay far away from men like that.” (Female pastor, Nebraska)
- ◆ “If domestic violence was occurring in my congregation, I’d surely be the first to know about it.” (Male pastor, Texas)
- ◆ “I’ve been through abusive relationships myself on a couple of occasions. I can spot an abuser from a mile away. I’m certain there are no perpetrators in my congregation.” (Female pastor, Washington)
- ◆ “We are a God-fearing bunch. Abuse is a sin.” (Male pastor, Tennessee)
- ◆ “The average income per couple here is over six figures. Many of the people in this particular congregation have a doctoral degree.” (Male pastor, Iowa)

- ◆ “There’s simply no evidence that domestic violence is happening in my congregation.” (Male and female clergy throughout the United States)

“It doesn’t happen here!’ How many times I have heard pastors make that statement when the subject of domestic violence in the faith community is a topic of conversation,” reports the Rev. Robert S. Owens, pastor emeritus of the First Presbyterian Church in Honolulu. “An alarming number of clergy persons actually believe there are no abused women in their congregations, but those of us who have been involved in the effort to help end the vicious cycle of spouse abuse know better. No congregation is immune. In fact, too many men in leadership positions in our churches are themselves abusers, including pastors, elders, deacons, counselors, and Bible teachers. They even abuse the Word of God in an effort to justify the abuse of their wives, using scripture to abuse them in the name of God.”

The Rev. Dr. Marie Fortune, founder and senior analyst of FaithTrust Institute in Seattle, Washington, is a pioneer in addressing the impact of domestic violence on religious communities. She also is very familiar with the way clergy and other pastoral ministers deny the problem, writing in her online newsletter, “I still have faith leaders say to me, ‘But no one ever comes to me with this problem.’” According to Dr. Fortune, these particular clergy are drawing the conclusions that (1) they don’t have domestic violence in their faith communities, and (2) they don’t need to be trained to deal with a problem they don’t have. “If a battered woman asks me whether she should talk to her faith leader or not, I usually say no. If she has to ask, then I doubt that it is safe to go to that person. I doubt that the leader has been trained;

if he/she has been trained, then he/she should have been talking and praying about the issue from the pulpit to let their people know that their leader is trained, aware, and available.”<sup>3</sup>

### **When Appropriate Training Has Not Occurred**

Both research and the experience of victims and survivors indicate that abused women who seek help from untrained clergy typically find themselves in an even more dangerous situation. Well-intentioned spiritual leaders who lack appropriate training in domestic violence awareness often simply direct victims into counseling of some sort—couples’, marriage, and individual counseling of abused women or abusive men. Others attempt to address the issue without the support of community service providers. Still others offer quick-fix solutions, usually accompanied by “God talk” and quoting biblical passages.

“I do think my pastor genuinely wanted to help me and my family,” says Mary, a victim-survivor whose husband, a confessed Christian and Bible study leader, abused her emotionally, physically, psychologically, and spiritually for several years. “However, without adequate training and little experience, the most genuine thought-out guidance in instances of abuse can be devastating to the safety and well-being of a victim who is trying to escape. Keep in mind, I ended up having my husband arrested after he held a knife to my throat and threatened to cut me into pieces. This man was very scary. He had all the characteristics of a sociopath. But pastors cannot imagine a man they know—a friend, a workout buddy, a parishioner—saying or doing such horrible things. They are caught off guard. This is all

the more reason why the education of clergy members is paramount.”

Dave Lautz was Mary’s pastor during much of the time she was married to her abusive Christian husband. Lautz acknowledges making mistakes because he lacked training in domestic violence intervention strategies. “Probably the biggest mistake I made, and one of the most common, was to doubt Mary’s story,” admits Lautz. “It is one of the most common mistakes spiritual leaders make because, unless we have had firsthand experience with an abuser or gone through domestic violence awareness training, it’s almost impossible to believe that a person could possibly treat his wife that way, especially a person who goes to our church, who is actively involved in ministry activities and church leadership, and who is someone we know personally and consider a friend.”

As we will see in the next chapter, after Pastor Lautz received appropriate domestic violence awareness training, he became very instrumental in helping Mary and her daughters break free from the grasp of her abusive husband.

### **The Importance of Collaboration**

No one from any professional discipline has the education and training to address by themselves all the complicated issues associated with domestic violence. When people attempt to step beyond the bounds of their knowledge base, they endanger victims-survivors and even themselves. “I tried to talk with other pastors about my husband’s abusive behavior, and they’d tell me to ‘pray more,’” recalls Joyce, who was married for twenty-four years to an abusive

Christian church elder. “They would ask, ‘Is he hitting you?’ I told them he strangled me on several occasions. They then asked, ‘Did he leave any marks?’ When I told the pastors that no marks were left, they’d say, ‘Well, God will fix the problem.’ They were of no help at all.”

From 1995 to 2010, researchers at Religion and Violence eLearning (RAVE), collected data on domestic violence from more than 500 religious leaders. They discovered that most pastors have never visited the transition house in or near their local area and they do not know by name any of the workers in the local shelter. In addition, most pastors have never preached a message that explicitly condemns wife abuse and/or child abuse. RAVE researchers also found that clergy are reluctant to refer to outside community resources those who come to them for help, and referrals are least likely from clergy reporting little knowledge or training in domestic violence.<sup>4</sup>

### **Why Do Victims-Survivors Remain with Their Offenders?**

One of the most frequently asked questions about domestic violence is why do victims stay? However, a far more pertinent question is, why do so many men have the need to use emotional, physical, psychological, sexual, and spiritual abuse tactics against the women they say they love? Many factors lead victimized women to stay with the men who abuse them. Here are a few:

- ◆ Isolation from family, friends, places of worship, and community resources.

- ◆ The perpetrator's promises that he will change.
- ◆ The perpetrator's threats to kill, kidnap, or physically harm the victim's children, parents, siblings, pets, and the victim herself, or threats to kill himself. It should be noted that all threats made by perpetrators must be taken seriously. By far the most dangerous times for a victimized woman are when she begins disclosing the abuse and when she attempts to leave her abusive partner.
- ◆ The victim loves her abuser. Most women don't want their marriages or partnerships to end. They just want the abuse to stop.
- ◆ The batterer and others blame the victim for the abuse, and she is told that it is her responsibility to fix the problem.
- ◆ Religious and cultural beliefs, teachings, and traditions offered to females by spiritual leaders, congregational laity, educators, family members, and other segments of society instruct women and girls to assume a subservient role to males. Often these precepts are said to be ordained by God.<sup>5</sup>

"I was in an abusive situation from 1987 to 1991," admits Janine Limas, education director at Interval House, a shelter located in Long Beach, California. She explains why she remained with the man who abused her: "At that time domestic violence wasn't being discussed in the church and, for the most part, this is still the case today. My whole life

I had grown up hearing from my parents, Christian family members, and others in the church that when you get married, you don't get divorced."

### **Why Are Most Abusers Male?**

While it is very important for clergy and other pastoral ministers to recognize that most men in churches and the rest of society are not abusive, it is also essential that we acknowledge that perpetrators of intimate partner abuse—and all other forms of violence—are, in fact, primarily male. According to the Bureau of Justice Statistics *Crime Brief: Intimate Partner Violence, 1993–2001* (published in February 2003), women accounted for 85 percent of victims of intimate partner violence, while men made up approximately 15 percent.<sup>6</sup> Data compiled from the Bureau of Justice Statistics in 2007 reported that females were two times more likely than male victims to be sexually assaulted and nine times more likely to be raped by their partners. Males are also more likely than are females to threaten to kill their partners.<sup>7</sup> Why is there so much male violence in the world? Many factors contribute to the problem.

### **Rationalization for Violent Behavior**

"Batterers and sex offenders have so entrenched themselves in their behavior and beliefs that they have become experts in rationalizing their abuse," says Joseph R. Bloom, director of programs for Children's Alliance of Hawaii, located in Honolulu. A clinical social worker, Bloom has been working for the past seventeen years in the field of domestic violence

and child sexual abuse awareness. He also facilitates groups for men who batter their intimate partners.

According to Bloom, batterers and sex offenders “use rational but false explanations for their behavior. Some experience this as being slick, and rightfully so. But the clinical understanding of what is happening is that they use rationalization to protect their self/public-image. Who wants to see themselves or be known as a batterer or sex offender?” Bloom contends that many perpetrators see themselves as disciplinarians and/or sex educators. For many it is better to go to prison for murder than for being a convicted child/woman beater or molester.

“Rationalizations come in many forms,” says Bloom. “The most common are: ‘I lost control.’ ‘If she would have just shut up, I wouldn’t have had to hit her.’ ‘She wouldn’t stop getting in my face.’ It would be fair to say that when one is rationalizing their behavior, he will always have an excuse that lies outside of him. This absence or lack of accountability and responsibility, either self imposed or, more sadly, not demanded or even expected by others, helps perpetuate the abuse of women, children, and other men.”

One of the many contributing factors leading to men’s predominant role as abuser in domestic violence situations is the failure on the part of individuals and organizations, in both religious and secular communities, to hold men accountable for their crimes and sins, especially when these vengeful acts are perpetrated against women and children.

A second contributing factor is the privilege granted to males by most religious and secular segments of society. Even though this undeserved right does not directly cause men to batter women and children, it provides a sense

of entitlement that suggests to males that they can have what they want when they want it, no matter who gets hurt in the process. In faith communities, these behaviors are often backed by some alleged biblical “truth.”

“It is not unusual to hear some people, primarily men, seeking to justify their strong, dominating, oppressive, and even violent abuse against women on the basis of some scriptural passages,” says the Rev. Fritz Fritschel, a retired Lutheran pastor and university professor. “Such an attempt to seek biblical rationale for their actions should cause us to examine closely the background of such reasoning. It is not only scripture that is used as a source of their logic, but history of theological thought can also be used to reinforce their ideas.” Fritschel goes on to say, “Still, we are convinced of love as the binding force in the world, indeed the universe, but love understood as creative and redemptive. It encompasses a love that listens closely, a kind of deep listening that allows itself to feel along with the other in compassion and empathy. It is a love that continually holds up ideal aims for creatures. Thus, there are times to say a firm no to conditions that violate the well-being of individuals. Child abuse, elder abuse, and domestic violence are certainly included in such prohibitions.”

Despite the cautions Pastor Fritschel offers, the misuse of biblical passages by both abusive men and some males who are not perpetrators remains prevalent. “A lot of times, due to his demands, I would ask my husband not to touch me,” recalls Joyce, who was married for twenty-four years to an abusive church elder. “So he became enraged and raped me. He justified his criminal actions by misquoting scripture, ‘The Bible says, as my wife, you don’t have control over your body, I do.’”

## **Intimate Partner Violence in GLBT Communities**

National statistics indicate that individuals who self-identify as gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender experience similar rates of intimate partner violence as do heterosexual couples. However, due to widespread discrimination and other acts of bigotry, GLBT victims-survivors face additional challenges.<sup>8</sup> Clergy and other pastoral ministers can provide much-needed spiritual and emotional care to GLBT victims-survivors of intimate partner violence. As with heterosexual victims-survivors, kind expressions of support, such as, “No one deserves to be abused” or “God loves you” or “Your safety is my primary concern,” can let GLBT victims know they are not alone. As spiritual leaders, it is important to remind ourselves that the needs of GLBT individuals are very similar to those victims-survivors who are heterosexual, and our responsibilities continue to be providing help for those who are hurting and accountability for those who hurt others.

“There are a lot of presumptions indicating that GLBT and heterosexual domestic violence situations are hugely different, but they’re not really,” says Iain Gill, director of education at the Gay Men’s Domestic Violence Project in Cambridge, Massachusetts. The agency serves people living in Connecticut, Massachusetts, and Rhode Island. According to Gill, “The definition we use for domestic violence—that is, one person systematically abusing another person to gain power and control in that particular relationship—applies equally to heterosexual victims and lesbian and gay victims.”

But Gill also acknowledges some of the extra hurdles and obstacles for members of GLBT communities: “They

face a barrier to accessing services. A lot of mainstream programs do not allow men or people who are transgender to stay in their shelters. This is a huge difference in comparison to heterosexual domestic violence victims. As long as organizations prevent people who are victims from staying in their [shelters], there will always be a problem.” Furthermore, members of GLBT communities have to deal with isolation, stigmatization, and the fear of being re-victimized, especially if their sexual orientation or gender identity becomes public knowledge prior to their readiness to share this information.

In reference to GLBT individuals, Christian clergy and other pastoral ministers will frequently recite the phrase, “Love the sinner, not the sin.” The focus of this particular mantra appears not to be on love, but on labeling gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender people as immoral. While certainly not all spiritual leaders embrace this belief system, many do. It must be acknowledged that such judgment does not accompany other “sins.” For example, few Christian spiritual leaders would dispute that adultery and domestic violence are immoral acts. Yet “Love the sinner, not the sin” is rarely used in reference to these common immoralities. In fact, as we will see throughout this book, acts of adultery and domestic violence, especially when the violator is a male, are most often excused, ignored, or offered justification by clergy and other pastoral ministers.

All people deserve the right to be free from abuse and violence, whether they are bisexual, gay, heterosexual, lesbian, or transgender. As clergy and other pastoral ministers, we have the responsibility to provide for the spiritual needs of these hurting individuals.

## **Effects of Economic Downturn on Domestic Violence**

On September 15, 2009, 83 percent of identified local domestic violence programs in the United States and its territories participated in the 2009 National Census of Domestic Violence Services, also known as Census Day. The results of the study showed the effects the economic downturn is having upon victims-survivors of domestic violence and their children across the country. As spiritual leaders, it is important for us to remember that though the loss of a job or home is very stressful to individuals and families, an economic crisis does not cause domestic violence. As mentioned previously, a perpetrator will blame anyone and everything for his abusive behavior, except himself. Scores of men and women have lost their jobs and homes and still remain loving and respectful toward their intimate partners, children, pets, and property.

According to Census Day 2009 records, despite helping more than 65,000 adults and children, 9,280 requests for services went unmet because of limited resources, funding, and staff. Programs have always been underfunded and understaffed, but the economic recession has severely hindered the ability of programs to provide the same level of services to victims. The study found that hundreds of thousands of Americans have lost their jobs and homes, forcing families to live in the dark because they can't afford to pay the electricity bill, and children to go to school hungry because families can't afford food. Similarly, domestic violence programs, besieged with funding cuts, are working in the dark and turning down thermostats to keep costs down so they can continue to serve victims. Victims often depend on the partnerships

and coordination of their communities to keep them safe. Regrettably, dwindling funding for social service agencies has had direct consequences on victims. In California, because an entire floor of a county jail was closed due to budget restrictions, an abuser was let free and, despite a no-contact order, repeatedly harassed the victim.

Across the country, programs report that the lack of employment and affordable housing are major barriers for the victims they serve. Without a job, survivors cannot attain basic necessities such as food and shelter. Deciding to leave an abusive relationship is much more difficult when survivors know they will not be able to find food, healthcare, or housing for themselves and their children. In homes where domestic violence already exists, economic difficulties and stress can intensify the violence, contributing to an environment that makes domestic violence worse. Abusers use a wide range of intimidation and terrorizing tactics to control their victims; programs are reporting a disturbing trend of abusers using starvation as a means of intimidation and control. In Kansas, a program provided healthcare to a woman and her child who were severely ill from starvation after the abuser imprisoned them in their home. In other states, advocates reported similar stories of food restrictions and starvation by abusers.

On September 15, 2009, the national unemployment rate was 9.8 percent, but in some communities, such as one in Michigan, the unemployment rate was more than 26 percent. A Michigan advocate noted, "With another major industry shutting its doors, the effect on domestic violence victims will be tremendous." Sixty-five percent of programs reported that job loss by the abuser (resulting in increased stress in the home and more opportunities to abuse) contributed to an increase in demand for services, and 67 percent

of programs reported that job loss by the victim (resulting in limited financial resources) contributed to an increase in demand for services.<sup>9</sup>

### Separating Fact from Myth

A number of myths are associated with domestic violence. In order to be effective partners with other members of our communities in addressing this global problem, clergy and other pastoral ministers need to take caution as to not perpetuate these commonly held falsehoods:

*Victims-survivors are to blame for the abuse being perpetrated against them.* No one can provoke another person to use abusive tactics. This is true even if the person being violated has an alcohol or a drug problem; has chosen not to participate in sexual activities with her/his intimate partner; is said to be “too cold,” “too emotional,” “too flirtatious,” “or “too pushy”; and even if the victim-survivor is having an extrarelational affair. The person solely responsible for the violence being perpetrated is the one who has chosen to be violent—the batterer.

*No man of God would ever abuse his female intimate partner.* Perpetrators of domestic violence are found in every aspect of religious and secular society. Some of these violators are spiritual leaders—board members, deacons, educators, elders, pastors, pastoral counselors, and youth ministers.

*Domestic violence is caused by Satan.* An all-too-common claim by men who abuse their intimate partners is that some outside evil force, most often identified as “Satan,” is the real culprit for the violence being perpetrated. Male spiritual leaders are especially vulnerable to being taken in by this tactic of deception. We need to pay special attention

to one specific dynamic surrounding an alleged “Satan invasion.” It occurs only when a male violator is facing accountability for his criminal and sinful behaviors.

*Alcohol and other drugs cause domestic violence.* Alcohol and other drugs can lower a person’s inhibitions. Some drugs can even cause a person to have mood swings or experience feelings of paranoia. Nevertheless, perpetrators make the conscious choice to use abuse tactics against their intimate or former intimate partners.

*Perpetrators have a mental illness.* Less than 20 percent of batterers have a diagnosable mental illness. And, most people who have been diagnosed with having a mental illness do not abuse their intimate partners.

*If female victims-survivors stay with, pray for, and obey their abusive husbands it will please God and Jesus Christ and make everything in their marriages okay.* This myth is especially damaging to battered Christian women. The corollary is that if an abused wife remains with her abusive husband, obeys and submits herself to him, and recites enough prayers, God and Jesus will be pleased and, miraculously, the marriage will become healthy. Spiritual leaders and congregation members who propagate this belief system never provide a clear explanation as to how it actually works. However, as a result of this commonly employed falsehood, women across the United States and in all other parts of the world suffer greater abuse from their violent husbands. And some end up being murdered by them.

*There are no abused women in my congregation.* One in four women will experience emotional, physical, psychological, sexual, and/or spiritual abuse in their lifetime. This daunting statistic indicates abused women are in every congregation. As a general rule, if we clergy and other pastoral

ministers include a message in our sermons and teachings explicitly condemning domestic violence, invite community service providers to present material on domestic violence to our congregations, and display information on domestic violence awareness in women's restrooms throughout our church buildings, then chances are great that victims-survivors will believe it is safe for them to share their stories of abuse with us. On the other hand, if domestic violence is never discussed by spiritual leaders then the chances are great that victims-survivors will not believe it is safe for them to share their stories of horror with us.

### **Conclusion**

Situations of domestic violence are occurring in every congregation and community in the United States. Spiritual leaders who choose to accept this sad and scary reality, seek appropriate training in domestic violence prevention and intervention strategies, and seek to collaborate with service providers in various other professional disciplines within their communities will prove helpful to the victims-survivors and perpetrators living and worshiping with them. If, however, we clergy and other pastoral ministers choose not to believe intimate partner violence exists where we live, serve, and worship—and thus do not receive appropriate training in domestic violence response—the overall safety and well-being of victims-survivors will be significantly compromised. Perpetrators will also escape accountability.



### Questions for Discussion

1. Are you aware of victims-survivors and perpetrators of domestic violence living in your community and worshipping with you? If yes, what concrete steps are you taking to address the needs of these individuals? If no, provide specific reasons as to why you think intimate partner abuse has escaped members of your congregation.
2. Have you ever preached an entire sermon or taught a class on domestic violence awareness? If yes, what approach and texts were used? If not, can you make plans to do so?
3. Do you know the names of agencies in your community that provide services to victims-survivors of domestic violence? If yes, have you ever had a face-to-face meeting with an advocate, executive director, shelter worker, or any other person serving in these particular agencies? If yes, what topics were discussed in this meeting? If no, why has contact never been established?

4. What are some of the myths you yourself have previously held or currently hold about victims-survivors and perpetrators of domestic violence? As a result of reading this chapter, has your belief system changed? If yes, provide specific details.