

# Broken Vows

*Written by Karen and Bruce McAndless-Davis. Bruce was abusive for the first ten years of their relationship. After several years of hard work (involving both group and individual counselling), Bruce changed his abusive behaviour and the beliefs underlying his actions.*

*Karen and Bruce have now been happily married in a relationship of trust and respect for over ten years. Karen is co-author of *When Love Hurts*, a book for victims of domestic violence. Bruce is a minister in New Westminster, British Columbia. They both work with women and men on issues of abuse.*

**Karen:** We sat in the Emergency waiting room. I sat gingerly on the edge of my seat, nervous and in more pain than I had ever experienced before. Bruce sat fidgeting with his hands. As we waited for a doctor to examine me, the reality of my situation began to sink in.

I was about to lie to a doctor. I am an honest person, but here I was about to tell a doctor that I had broken my rib while skiing. That was not the truth. Bruce had broken my rib in a hateful fit of rage. I was seeking medical attention for injuries that my husband had inflicted on me.

How could this have happened? How could a husband who I thought of as loving and kind do such a hurtful thing to me? What was going on?

The shocking realization that Bruce was abusive took as long as it did because of our assumptions about abusive men and abused women. We break all the stereotypes: we are middle-class, highly educated professionals, and we come from good homes. Further, we are both long-time church members and pastors.

I didn't see myself as an abused woman. The only images I had came from television. I thought of abused women as weak and uneducated. And Bruce certainly did not fit my image of an abusive husband. I thought they were wild and out of control -- men who drank too much and were nasty and hateful.

Bruce's behaviour was confusing. I saw him being kind and pleasant to our friends and family. He was often loving to me, and I loved him. But he got angry so easily; and, when he was angry, he was hurtful. Since his hurtful behaviour was always directed at me, it made me believe I was the cause of the abuse.

Bruce's unpredictable behaviour made me feel like I was crazy. In subtle ways he tried to control my actions and my thoughts. He always had to prove that he was right and that I was wrong; we couldn't simply disagree. His rage would silence me.

I constantly had to decide whether an issue or concern was worth raising with him - if it was safe to bring it up. When Bruce did any housework, he became angry and resentful. He was always picking fights and it was hard to avoid explosive situations. I was exhausted living with him.

I knew there was something wrong but I didn't know what and I didn't know where to turn for help. As time went on, Bruce seemed to be angry more and more. Finally, when Bruce broke my rib I began to see the seriousness of our situation.

I wondered if this was abuse.

**Bruce:** The idea that I was one of those men who beat their wives was unthinkable. I believed in equality and respect, not domination and violence. But, clearly, my behaviour betrayed my beliefs. My actions were intended to control Karen and I did this any way I could. Putting her down, embarrassing her in front of others and arguing relentlessly were ways I made Karen feel inferior. When I couldn't control her with my tongue, I would do so with a threatening gesture, by driving recklessly to scare her, or by blocking her exit from the room. As is typical with abusive men, my behaviour escalated to pushing, slapping and, finally, punching. At the time I didn't see what I was doing as abusive; I just

thought I had a problem with my temper. I didn't think about how it was affecting Karen. I didn't think about anybody but myself.

It scared me when I realized that I had actually broken Karen's rib. My so-called temper was getting out of hand. I was ashamed at what I had done, but more because it went against what I believed about myself rather than because of its effect on Karen. I was still concerned only about myself. I desperately wanted to keep my behaviour a secret, now more than ever.

Karen was living on pain killers and I had moved into a different bedroom. Neither of us were talking about it. It seemed our marriage was over.

**Karen:** Keeping my pain a secret to protect Bruce became suffocating. I needed to tell someone. We decided to tell two of our closest friends, one of whom was a counsellor. At last, we had broken the silence.

Bruce needed to be held accountable for his behaviour and I needed support from people who would be concerned for my safety and well being. Our friend referred us to a counselling agency where Bruce entered a group for abusive men and I entered a support group for women.

The first few weeks of group counselling were wonderful for me. It was like hearing the gospel. I began to understand that virtually all Bruce's behaviour towards me was abusive. I discovered that I did not deserve the treatment I received. I discovered that Bruce was in the wrong -- not me. I discovered I was not crazy. And I discovered I was not alone. The six other women in my group had experiences incredibly similar to mine.

The way Bruce treated me was not simply the way Bruce treated me, it was the way abusive men treat women.

While this was all good news, I had a sad realization. As I began to see the pervasiveness of Bruce's abuse, I felt the need to leave the marriage. It wasn't enough for him to simply stop the physical violence, he needed to stop all the verbal and emotional abuse, too. This abuse seemed to be so much a part of who he was that I couldn't imagine him without it. I didn't believe it was possible for a person to change that much.

I thought a lot about leaving but was torn. I still loved Bruce but his treatment of me was intolerable. I also felt I couldn't deal with the terrible embarrassment of a separation.

Perhaps even more important, I was afraid to be alone. One of the impacts of Bruce's abuse was that I thought poorly of myself. I thought that no other man would want to be with me. Bruce was my only chance for marriage and family.

While I wrestled with whether or not to leave, Bruce began to change. The physical abuse stopped immediately and the threats of violence stopped shortly after. Verbal attacks became less common as he struggled with ending the mental and emotional abuse.

I could tell that he was motivated to change. Participating in his group was important to him. I decided to stick it out for a while and see just how far he would go.

**Bruce:** In group counselling, I discovered all the ways I had abused Karen. In the past, I hadn't seen any pattern of abusive behaviour, simply a few instances of what I called 'losing my temper.' As far as I was concerned, we only had 'arguments' or 'fights.' I was amazed to discover a gradually escalating pat-tern of emotional and physical abuse since the early years of our relationship.

To change, I first had to admit the full dimensions of my abuse and to see the horrible impact it had on Karen. My behaviour had made her feel worthless. I was so good at turning things around that I made her feel she was crazy when she was upset by my abuse. I had convinced her of a great, horrible lie: the abuse would stop if only she were somehow better. The truth was, nothing she did or didn't do could

stop the abuse; only I could. My abusive behaviour wasn't simply something that happened when I 'lost it,' it was a choice I made every day in order to control her and keep me and my needs at the centre of our relationship.

Admitting my sin -- my abusiveness -- was very difficult. I had to acknowledge the horror of what I had done to Karen. When I finally admitted to my monstrous behaviour, I felt very alone.

Terrified of being judged, I chose to talk to no one. Having to reject who I was and how I behaved, I didn't know how to behave or who to be. I was an abusive man. I hurt my wife emotionally, physically and spiritually. How could I ever make things right?

I still had so much to learn. We received counselling for another year as I continued to work on living in a respectful and mutual relationship. While I gave up pieces of abusiveness, it was a long time before I took complete responsibility for my behaviour.

I had to learn how to put Karen's needs and the needs of our relationship before my own. This was harder than I could ever have imagined. It took months of exhausting work (for Karen, our counsellors, and me) before I came to realize how utterly self-centred I was.

I had grown up believing that every relationship is based on power. Unable to envision a relationship in which I saw Karen as truly equal, I had asserted my superiority over Karen by belittling and controlling her.

Through counselling, I was invited to see relationships in a radically new way. It took me a long time to let go of my power, but I have finally learned think in terms of 'us' instead of 'me.'

**Karen:** Bruce worked as hard in our second year of counselling as he did in the first. He realized that he had broken the vows he had made at our wedding. He took responsibility, stopped the abuse and learned how to be respectful.

The change in Bruce is incredible. He is a completely different person now. It is wonderful to live in a home where I am supported, encouraged and cared for. I feel myself flourishing in my ministry -- all the energy that I needed to survive in my relationship is free to be used in positive ways in the world.

Today, 10 years since we first sought counselling, Bruce and I have a marriage that is characterized by mutuality, respect and care. We are deeply thankful for this new life.

**Bruce:** For us, this is an Easter story. This journey has given me a profound experience of redemption. Day by day, I experienced every step of the process of reconciliation.

I began by examining and confessing my sin -- all of it. I slowly repented -- turned around -- and changed my behaviour and the attitudes that led to it.

Then, I started to find ways of making restitution (or making amends) through acts of love - from the simplest act of doing more than my 'share' of cleaning, to praising Karen in front of others rather than embarrassing or humiliating her.

None of this can ever erase what I did, but there are ways I can help restore our relationship, to rebuild trust and to heal the hurt in our lives. The result is forgiveness, reconciliation and new life, none of which is possible without confession, repentance and restitution. Through this experience, Karen was for me the very embodiment of God's grace. In Karen, I experienced the forgiving love of God in the most real way imaginable.

More than anything else I have ever experienced, this has been a profound journey of faith. Never have I felt God's love more deeply, or found more joy in life, than in our relationship that has been resurrected.

**Karen:** We have shared our story in the hope of breaking down stereotypes that keep abused women in isolation. We hope our story will encourage battered women to seek the support and safety they deserve.

Although our story of abuse is all too common, the resurrection of our marriage is not. Change is possible but only when abusers are willing to take complete responsibility for their behaviour.

Real change does not happen unless abusive men are willing to learn a whole new way of living in relationship. Sadly, most abusers simply do not care enough to do the hard work and to give up their power. Whatever the abuser's choice, women must choose to be emotionally and physically safe. In the midst of our pain, God will go with us.