



## **Safe Church Ministry: A Church Leader's Role**



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# **Safe Church Ministry: A Church Leader's Role**

## **A Vision for Safe Churches**

Healthy churches are safe churches whose members respect the infinite value of each person. In an environment that nurtures worship and spiritual growth, people need not fear any kind of abuse.

Imagine a church where relationships are open and honest; a church whose members rejoice in the truth, share their lives with one another in joy and in suffering, and embody the grace and love of our Savior.

But we do not live in a perfect world. Our churches are full of sinful people. Many individuals in our churches have experienced abuse, as one who has been abused or who has abused others, or both.

A 1992 study by the Calvin College Social Research Center found that 28 percent of respondents in the Christian Reformed Church had experienced physical, sexual, or emotional abuse. And 15 percent had abused someone else.

The consequences of abuse are devastating and long-lasting. In a safe church, people who struggle with issues related to abuse find compassion and understanding. There is someone who is willing to walk alongside them to pursue justice and accountability. They are not subjected to blame and shame.

Abuse thrives in silence and secrecy. We must not allow it to thrive in our churches. Instead our challenge is to prevent abuse and to respond effectively when abuse occurs. Change is impossible as long as the problem is denied or ignored.

We are called to be light in the world. The church has a key role to play in promoting respect, love, justice, and dignity—values that help prevent abuse and that often stand in contrast to the culture around us. Allowing abuse to continue in our church communities casts a dark shadow on our witness. As the church follows its calling, our faith is encouraged and the power of the Lord is revealed.

This handbook is written for church leaders who play a key role in the life of the church, including council members, staff, teachers, ministry coordinators, and youth leaders. Church leaders have a special responsibility to respond to abuse and not to participate in abuse. In addition to the responsibilities inherent in being spiritual leaders, church leaders may also face legal liability in situations of abuse, depending on church policies and insurance.

This handbook is also appropriate for church members who may encounter people who are struggling with the issues surrounding abuse. Most abuse does not involve a church leader but rather occurs at home or in an intimate relationship. Knowing about abuse will help church members recognize it and respond in helpful ways.

### **What do we mean when we say “abuse”?**

Numerous legal and criminal definitions exist for various types of abuse, including rape, sexual harassment, child molestation, and the like. In addition to legal definitions that can be prosecuted in a court of law, churches recognize ungodly behavior that harms individuals and church communities. These behaviors involve the misuse of position and authority as well as physically or sexually inappropriate behavior. In this handbook the term *abuse* will be used for all such behavior, whether or not it is a criminal offense. All abuse needs to be taken seriously.

### **What Is the Harm Done in Abuse?**

#### **Harm to the Church and its mission**

Our concern, as Christians and church leaders, is an ecclesiastical one. We are called to be a witness to the loving relationship between Christ and his Bride (the church). Our individual relationships with one another in his body (the church) are designed to reflect the love of our Savior.

#### **The beginnings of abuse**

In Genesis 1-2, Adam and Eve lived together in perfect harmony with the Lord. Created in God’s image, male and female, God gave them the mandate to rule over and to care for all the earth.

They lived in the Lord’s abundant garden, trusting God to provide everything they needed. Naked and unashamed, they hid nothing, and the Lord declared it was all very good.

In chapter 3, sin came into the world and destroyed the perfect plan. Openness and honesty were replaced by shame, fear, hiding, and blaming.

The story of humanity’s fall into sin reveals the heart of abuse. The Lord said to the woman, “Your desire will be for your husband, and he will rule over you” (Gen. 3:16). This is not a mandate, but rather a description of the sad result of sin. Equal dignity and partnership was lost, and patriarchy developed in our fallen state.

#### *Our Calling:*

*We are called to be a witness to the loving relationship between Christ and his bride (the church).*

*Our individual relationships with one another in his body (the church) are designed to reflect the love of our Savior.*

One person ruling over another is not the original and perfect plan for relationship. It is not what we were created for, nor is it the plan for our new creation in Christ. One person ruling over another for selfish gain *is* the guiding principle behind abuse.

### **Hope for redeemed relationships**

Abuse is not usually a one-time incident. It is a pattern of behavior in which one person seeks to gain control over another in a destructive manner. Coercion, intimidation, threats, isolation, and physical and sexual violence are all examples of abusive behavior. An abused person experiences a loss of sense of self.

Jesus brings redemptive power to break the bonds of sin. With the Lord's help, we fight against sinful abusive power. We are told, "Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others" (Philippians 2:3-4). We are called to live with the same mind in us that is in our Lord, Jesus, who in humility gave up his power in loving service to others, for their sake. It's the opposite of abuse.

Jesus shows us the way and invites all of us to follow Him into redeemed relationships that mirror his relationship with us, his church. Imagine a community of people, trusting the Lord, with no need to pursue selfish gain, free to use power in service and love to others. What a contrast, what a light shining in a dark world that would be!

### **Harm to those who have been abused**

Harm done in abusive situations is very real. Yet it may go undetected because we are good at hiding inner struggles—especially at church.

Those who have suffered emotional, physical, and sexual abuse are more apt to experience serious clinical symptoms such as depression, substance abuse, anxiety, self-harm, or suicide.

In addition, those who have suffered abuse often feel deep shame, believing that they in some way are responsible. They may also feel betrayal, if the abuser is someone they know. As a result, many have lost their ability to trust and to give and receive love. They may be unable to build relationships with others and with the Lord.

We must not participate in the dynamic of shame, which assigns blame to the one who has been victimized.

When abuse involves a church leader, the harm is more serious. Church leaders are perceived to have a close association with the Lord. They speak the Lord's words

and do the Lord's work. They hold a powerful and trusted position. When that sacred trust is broken, the consequences can be especially devastating. The issue is no longer an individual one; it involves a relationship with the church.

Allegations of abuse against a church leader are regarded very seriously in the CRC. Synod has approved a process for dealing with such allegations that should be carefully followed. Those who must deal with an allegation of sexual or physical misconduct by a church leader can refer to the handbook ***The Advisory Panel Process: A Guide for Church Councils***, for more specific information.

### **Harm to those hurt indirectly**

The effects of abuse reach far beyond those directly victimized. Others affected are referred to as secondary victims.

Children are very sensitive to emotion, and in particular, to their parents' emotion. Studies show that children who live with violence in the home have adverse brain development caused by the terror of abuse, whether the abuse is experienced directly or indirectly. When one parent abuses another, and children live in the home, the children indeed suffer.

Other family members, friends, and the entire church community can experience the effects of abuse. Family members may suffer in silence, ashamed to reveal the truth of their situation.

Many churches have been torn apart by a case of church leader abuse. Church members take sides, feel hurt, betrayed, and question everything about the church and its leadership.

### **Harm to those who abuse**

Those who abuse also need healing, care, and attention. A counselor who works with sex offenders and with those who abuse their partners, says, "The bottom line is that the guys in my groups are people that Jesus died for. If he died for them, the least I can do is try to help them."

#### ***Birth of a Night Terror***

*her children cowered  
swallowing their cries*

*until their tummies bloated  
eyes burned with unshed tears*

*they knew how to placate  
hold their fear contained*

*no safety in numbers  
as they clasped hands*

*bit their lips—drops of blood  
wet their skin*

*its coppery taste slid  
hot against their tongues*

*for now—stay alive  
herd your screams into  
nightmares*

*angry scenes to be replayed  
in bad dreams and night terrors*

*horror would pay many visits  
before being locked in dark  
chambers*

*to be pried loose  
at a later date*

© Irene Fridsma 2010

The cause of abuse lies squarely in the hands of the one who abuses. Abuse is a choice. Abuse will not stop until those who abuse stop doing it.

Our tendency in the Christian community is to want to move quickly to forgiveness. We think that the matter is over and done once the one who offends says "I'm sorry." We must not assume that those who abuse will not repeat their behavior. It is critical that carefully designed precautions and extremely close accountability remain in place to protect others from harm caused by those who abuse, and who may re-offend. The process of change is long and difficult and requires specialized intervention. More will be said about this in a later section.

Those who want to stop their abuse require professional help to unlearn harmful attitudes and behaviors and re-learn positive ways of interacting. Often abuse is a deeply ingrained pattern that demands a great deal of time and effort before he or she can experience change.

Others may not acknowledge their abusive behavior. They may be unable, or may refuse to see the harm caused by their actions. In some cases, deeper psychological disorders contribute to abusive behavior.

No one, even someone who abuses others, is beyond the reach of the Lord's long arms or transforming love. And though we stand firm in our belief in the Lord's power to heal and to forgive, we must also stand firm in protecting others from potential harm.

## **The Specifics: What Is a Church Leader to Do?**

### **An ounce of prevention . . .**

Stopping abuse before it happens is far better than dealing with devastating consequences after it happens.

**A safe church policy not only protects children, youth and those who are vulnerable among us, but also protects church staff and volunteers from potentially damaging allegations of abuse.**

We cannot prevent all abuse. What we can do is reduce the risk of abuse taking place in our churches. Every church should have a safe church policy to protect children, youth, and the most vulnerable among us.

A safe church policy also protects the church staff and volunteers from potentially damaging allegations of abuse.

Appointing a committee with a mandate to develop such policies and procedures is a good place to start. A council member should serve on the committee and be a liaison to the council.

Leadership at all levels must support and cooperate with the recommendations of the safe church committee. A safe church policy should include the ministry philosophy, definitions of abuse, general policies, and specific policies regarding discipline, supervision, transportation, screening, reporting, and response.

The safe church committee should provide training on a regular basis so that all staff, volunteers, and council members are aware of the policy and abide by it. The committee should also review the policy and training on an annual basis. Training for church leaders should include the following:

- their responsibility to maintain clear, healthy boundaries.
- the dynamic of power and control that operates in abusive situations.
- the specifics of the safe church policy, especially for those areas in which they are involved.
- where to go and how to make contact with others when more information is needed, including local resources, the safe church ministry team, and the office of Safe Church Ministry.

Education is an excellent prevention tool. Curriculum components that teach about respect and healthy relationships should be included at all age levels. Asking these questions is a good place to start:

- Do children learn about respectful interaction with others by example as well as well as by explicit teaching?
- Is there relevant discussion of bullying and of techniques for peaceful conflict resolution?
- Does the youth group discuss teen dating violence?
- Do premarital counseling sessions involve learning the warning signs of abuse?
- Do adult classes discuss spouse abuse or elder abuse?
- If your church has a peer mentoring program, are the mentors aware of the dynamics of abuse?

The church should also embrace local community resources. Dealing with abuse requires professional help, with the church in a supportive role of walking alongside the person experiencing abuse. Is your church able to refer someone who is involved in a violent or abusive relationship to local resources and agencies where he or she could find help?

Synod has urged each classis to have a safe church team available to assist churches in each classis with educational information and resources. Every church should have a representative on the safe church team. In some areas where each

classis does not have its own safe church team, regional teams have been formed. These regional teams act as resources for churches in more than one classis.

The office of Safe Church Ministry is responsible for training the safe church teams. In addition, you may contact the office of Safe Church Ministry directly for information. Additional resources are available on the Safe Church website: [www.crcna.org/safechurch](http://www.crcna.org/safechurch).

### **Is this really necessary?**

The short answer is yes! We still have work to do. We want to believe that we know each other and that abuse prevention and response are not needed in our church. Unfortunately, abuse remains a hidden problem. To deny that it exists among us is to deny the truth. We will miss out on the Lord's blessings if we fail to follow him in pushing back against the darkness of abuse.

### **What Are the Needs after Abuse Has Occurred?**

#### **Needs as the church restores its mission**

Our tendency is to not believe that abuse occurs, especially since some stories seem unbelievable, yet are true. We may know the family or the person implicated, which increases our tendency to deny or minimize what has happened. *Our disbelief results in secondary wounding of the victim*, which complicates and inhibits his or her spiritual healing. Secondary wounding is often as damaging as the primary abuse.

It's never easy to hear stories of abuse, and sharing a story of abuse is even harder. Such *reports need to be taken seriously*. Those who disclose abuse need to be assured that they have done the right thing in making it known.

*The church is not alone*. No church has all the resources needed to keep abuse response "in-house." Local resources can provide needed services as well as good advice for how to proceed. People with specific training who are experienced in dealing with abuse are a valuable resource for churches. When the church works together with local resources, the result is better outcomes for everyone. Church leaders and

*A powerful response is listening and being present. It's less important that we have the right answers or advice.*

<sup>11</sup> *When Job's three friends . . . heard about all the troubles that had come upon him, they set out from their homes and met together by agreement to go and sympathize with him and comfort him.* <sup>12</sup> *When they saw him from a distance, they could hardly recognize him; they began to weep aloud, and they tore their robes and sprinkled dust on their heads.* <sup>13</sup> *Then they sat on the ground with him for seven days and seven nights. No one said a word to him, because they saw how great his suffering was."*  
—Job 2

members can assist by *walking alongside* those who are affected, providing spiritual and emotional support.

No other agency is able to provide the healing support available through the church. Believing that *the Lord is at work in each situation* gives us strength to face the issues, however difficult. In each situation of abuse, the church has both the potential for great healing or for great harm. We have a choice.

The office of *Safe Church Ministry exists to be a resource for churches*. Feel free to contact the office with questions or explore our website for additional information: [www.crcna.org/safechurch](http://www.crcna.org/safechurch).

### **Needs of those who have been abused**

The first concern in responding to a situation of abuse is safety. Is the person currently in danger of harm? If so, precautions must be taken right away to get the person to a safe place. Ask, "Do you feel safe where you are now?" and "Is it safe for us to talk?" If not, explore with the person options to get to a safe place or to find a safe avenue for communication.

The church must give *a voice* to those who have been abused. We need to affirm these people and listen to them because the experience of abuse has robbed them of their voice.

Those who have been victimized by abuse need *empowerment* after experiencing the powerlessness of abuse. So any response to an abusive situation needs to be focused on the needs of those who have been wronged. They are the ones whose needs have been denied.

Those who have been victimized by abuse must have the opportunity to make their *own choices* regarding their situation. No one else is in a position to tell someone who has been abused what to do (no matter how well-intentioned or correct the advice may be).

Our most powerful response is *listening and being present*. It's less important that we have the right answers or advice to give.

What is needed, is a good listener, someone safe with whom to discuss and process feelings. Taking time to really listen is an invaluable gift. *A person who cares* can point to resources and offer information as well as be available for the person's needs. For example, a helper can offer to drive the person to a meeting or wait in the lobby during a counseling appointment.

It is tempting to want to "fix" the situation and to proceed quickly. However, those who have been abused will need *time* to grieve losses, to rediscover a lost self, to

slowly establish trust in relationships. Healing does not come quickly. The process can take many years.

*Theological issues such as forgiveness must be avoided* until the time has authentically arrived. Survivors of abuse who have suffered severe trauma must not have the burden of forgiving until they are truly ready. The church is a community of forgiven sinners, and we encourage forgiveness in others. However, the process of coming to the place of forgiveness cannot be rushed. Professional help may be needed and should be encouraged.

*Local* sexual assault, domestic violence, and men's and women's resource centers can provide additional *assistance*. They often offer support groups, counseling, advocacy and other kinds of support free of charge. Church members can be helpful by taking on a role of *coming alongside*, offering prayer, and providing the spiritual support that is not available from these community agencies.

### **When abuse involves a child**

If there is any indication that abuse involving a child has occurred, the matter must be reported to local authorities as soon as possible. It is our tendency not to believe that the abuse happened. It's especially hard to imagine abuse against a child. Yet *children, above all, need to be heard and believed*.

Listen to the child with calmness. *Affirm the child* by saying what a good decision it was to tell someone.

*Do not promise not to tell* anyone else; that may be a promise you cannot keep. You can assure the child that you will only tell someone who is able to help and that you will inform the child whom you have told.

It is not your job to investigate a child's story, only to *report what you have seen and heard* (with direct quotes when possible). A trained person will interview the child to determine what happened.

It's better to err on the side of caution. *If you suspect abuse, go ahead and report it*. It is better to report and have it turn out to be untrue than to ignore it and have this child or any other come to additional harm.

When abuse involves a church member or leader, or has occurred in connection with a church program, the matter should be reported according to the *reporting guidelines in the safe church policy* to the person designated to receive allegations of abuse. That person will in turn inform the pastor and a member of the church leadership team (if neither person is implicated in the abuse). In addition, the church's legal counsel and the church's insurance agent should be notified.

If the allegation turns out to be false then the wrongfully accused person needs to be restored, because he or she has also been victimized in the situation.

### **Needs of those hurt indirectly**

Family members and friends have very similar needs to those of people who have suffered abuse directly. They need *opportunity to process the experience* and what it means for them and for their relationships. Much of what has already been said applies to those who are indirectly affected.

These secondary victims may feel neglected even though their *pain and suffering may be just as intense*. It's important to consider all those who have been impacted by abuse and reach out to them with compassion and hope, free of judgment.

### **Needs of those who have abused**

#### **What goes on in the minds of those who abuse?**

Those who have chosen to abuse are also in need. They must be held *accountable* for their own behaviors and for the harm their choices have caused. This is often very difficult for them.

Thinking patterns of those who abuse often include *denial* (it wasn't me), *rationalization* (I had to do it because . . .), *minimization* (it wasn't that bad) and projection of *blame* (it's not my fault, he or she asked for it).

*Confusion* often exists between *regret* (I got caught), *remorse* (I'm sorry) and *repentance* (I was wrong, and I won't do that again to anyone). In addition, there is confusion surrounding the concepts of *love, affection, and intimacy*.

Those who are abusive often feel a sense of *entitlement* and do not recognize that what they have done is unacceptable. They may have no empathy for those they have hurt.

There is a tendency among those who abuse to blame others for their behavior rather than to *take responsibility* themselves. It can be a long process before they recognize that they are at fault or understand that their behavior has caused harm.

Dysfunctional family patterns may have enabled abusive behavior to continue so that it has become deeply ingrained. *Abuse is about power and control*, which is hard to give up. The need for power may mask feelings of inadequacy or powerlessness.

The abusive behavior has worked to get the person who abuses what he or she wants. Abuse is not an anger management issue; it involves *learning a new way of thinking*.

Though *substance abuse* may be involved, it is *not the reason* for the behavior. If the substance abuse ends, a sober person may continue to abuse.

### **Can a leopard change its spots?**

Change needs to happen at the root cause. *Specialized group intervention* led by trained professionals has proven more effective than individual counseling in changing abusive behaviors. In a group context, people help others to see things from a different perspective. Those who abuse should be referred to experts in the field who can provide the best help possible.

We cannot overemphasize the need for the church to avoid the tendency to want a “quick fix.” Those who abuse can be experts at manipulation and showing remorse. As a church community we are experts at accepting and believing others. This is a dangerous combination in the case of abuse. *Change should be expected to take years rather than months.* A church must be wise, maintaining close supervision and accountability to prevent re-offending.

In order to *maintain a safe environment at church*, free from abuse, abusive people will need to be removed from any position of leadership. They will need to have limitations about where and how they may serve at church. Using a “covenant of conduct” can be helpful in maintaining accountability. Samples are available from the office of Safe Church Ministry. Those who abuse must not serve in especially vulnerable situations, which include serving with children, youth, the elderly or those with disabilities. In addition, any one-on-one situations are extremely risky and must be avoided.

Those who abuse also need to experience acceptance and compassion from someone who cares for them in spite of what they have done. *Jesus’ love* for us does not depend on our deserving. As a church, we want to reflect that kind of love to people who have abused someone. This commitment to love unconditionally is not easy; however, it’s a powerful tool of transformation in the Lord’s hand.

We need to encourage *hope* that change is possible and be willing to walk alongside those who have abused on the long and difficult road toward healing and health. A context of caring for those who have abused does not in any way diminish the need for maintaining accountability and protecting others from potential harm. We must work against our tendency toward leniency; love does not mean leniency. Love rejoices in the truth.

### **A Final Note**

We live in a world that is steeped in sin, including abuse. Churches are not immune from its effects.

Some kinds of sin, more than others, can be subtle and socially acceptable. While we recognize that child abuse or rape are wrong, we may laugh at jokes that objectify women or make excuses for bad behavior: “boys will be boys.” Men need to be diligent, challenging other men to change this unhealthy climate.

In our sinful state, gender is a factor that has a positive correlation to abuse. Recognizing the subtle (and not-so-subtle) ways that women are devalued and disrespected in our culture, the church must work to affirm the infinite value and dignity of women, and of *all* people in our churches.

Thankfully, the Lord is with us and will help us fight this battle. Our part is to pray, to increase awareness, to take preventative action, and to respond effectively to abuse. Healthy churches are safe churches. Safe Church Ministry works to keep them that way with dignity and justice for all.

**To learn more, or to request a presentation or workshop, contact your safe church ministry representative or the office of Safe Church Ministry; call 616-241-1691 x2193 or email [safechurchministry@crcna.org](mailto:safechurchministry@crcna.org).**



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