

**PREVENTING & RESPONDING TO  
CLERGY PERPETRATED  
SEXUAL ABUSE**

**A GUIDE TO BEST PRACTICES**

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*My sacrifice, O God, is a broken spirit;  
a broken and contrite heart  
you, God, will not despise.  
Psalm 51:17*

## INTRODUCTION

In 2015, researchers at the Diana Garland School of Social Work of Baylor University wanted to learn how churches respond to complaints of clergy-perpetrated sexual abuse. We surveyed 280 adult female survivors who had filed reports of clergy abuse to their churches, and we interviewed 27 of those survivors in depth. As part of our survey and interviews, we asked survivors to tell us:

- 1) What has your church done that has been most helpful to your healing?
- 2) What should be included in a best practice guide for churches?

Based on their responses, we developed this guide for preventing and responding to clergy-perpetrated sexual abuse. We intentionally included suggestions and ideas from survivors. In fact, most of this guide is directly distilled from survivors' answers to our questions.

We have organized survivors' suggestions into four key areas: **(1) taking steps to prevent abuse, (2) preparing to respond, (3) helping victims find healing, and (4) healing the congregation.** This guide is not meant to be a "how to" manual. As church leaders develop policies for their congregations and denominations, they will need to work within their own ecclesiastical, historical, and cultural contexts. Critically, they will need to clearly understand the power structure in their organizations. Survivors interviewed for this study agreed that appropriate power sharing can help make congregations safer. Thus, many of the best practices are embedded in a philosophy of shared governance, mutual respect and conversation between congregants and church leaders.

We hope this guide will help leaders frame the issues they will need to consider as they develop their policies and practices.

## WHAT IS CLERGY SEXUAL ABUSE?

The following definition is offered:

**Clergy Sexual Abuse happens when a person with religious authority uses their role, position, and power to sexually harass, exploit, or engage in sexual activity with a person in their care.**

**This can include:**

- sexualizing conversations (including telephone, social media or email),
- asking for or transmitting unwanted sexual images/text,
- touching or hugging people who do not want to be touched,
- pushing for sexual involvement,
- creating hostility when the person being targeted attempts to set boundaries,
- using sexual language and jokes,
- pressing or rubbing up against a person,
- or invading personal space.

**The sexual activity can include but is not limited to:**

- touching sexual organs (over or under clothing),
- kissing,
- oral sex,
- masturbation,
- intercourse,
- or rape.

**Clergy Sexual Abuse is about the misuse of power by the perpetrator and the inability of the victim to provide consent because of that power differential.**

**Even if an individual nominally agrees to some form of sexual interaction, contact, or relationship, that agreement DOES NOT constitute consent.**

## TAKING STEPS TO PREVENT ABUSE

**Acknowledge reality.** Clergy sexual abuse can happen anywhere. No congregation is immune. Your church is not the exception, nor is your current minister.

**Screen leaders carefully.** When selecting a minister, check references and ask hard questions, including specific questions about sexual impropriety. Criminal background checks should be standard protocol for anyone working with vulnerable populations.

**Ensure accountability.** Emphasize that every congregant has a role in keeping the church safe. Encourage congregants to pay attention and speak up when they have concerns. The church may also want to consider these measures:

- Installing closed circuit cameras and windows in the doors and walls of offices.
- Hiring on-campus security guards
- Developing policies around clergy-congregant interactions on and off campus. Policies should address meetings, social media, and electronic communication.
- Normalizing dissent, so that congregants feel comfortable raising concerns. A culture of conformity can discourage people from sharing difficult truths.

**Avoid dual relationships.** Only trained, licensed counselors should offer pastoral counseling within a congregation. The senior minister should *never* attempt to counsel congregants, as it would create a dual role that a vulnerable congregant may find difficult to navigate. Pastors may offer care in crisis, but they must know when to refer congregants with extensive or complex needs.

**Educate clergy and church leaders** on how to prevent and respond to clergy sexual abuse. The church may either bring trainers in or send leaders to be trained. Ideally, the trainers should not be part of church leadership. Training is available from these and other organizations:

- The Hope of Survivors ([www.thehopeofsurvivors.com](http://www.thehopeofsurvivors.com))
- The Faithtrust Institute ([www.faithtrustinstitute.org](http://www.faithtrustinstitute.org))
- Darkness to Light ([www.d2l.org](http://www.d2l.org))
- Keeping Our Sacred Trust ([www.keepingoursacredtrust.org](http://www.keepingoursacredtrust.org))

**Educate the congregation.** Share from the pulpit, at least once a year, a clear definition of clergy sexual abuse. Make it clear that the minister or church leader is always responsible for setting and maintaining appropriate boundaries, especially with vulnerable congregants, and with those who may seek or welcome sexual relations with a minister. Consider having a trained lay leader participate in the presentation.

**Encourage a greater sharing of power.** Since a shared power structure can help prevent abuses, we suggest that congregations explore this area. Power sharing primarily involves two things: a leader who is willing to give congregants meaningful roles in church governance, and congregants who can use this power in ways that both support the pastor and provide accountability.

## PREPARING TO RESPOND

**Invite truth-telling.** Make sure the congregation has a clear understanding of clergy sexual abuse. Let congregants know whom to contact if they believe that they or others have experienced abuse. Share this information on the church bulletin board, in worship bulletins or newsletters on a regular basis, and in an annual pulpit presentation.

**Identify a victims' advocate** to receive reports of clergy sexual abuse, or two advocates (at least one female) in larger congregations. Consider training this advocate to understand sexual abuse and interpersonal violence more broadly, equipping them to support and advocate for victims of other kinds of abuse.

**Designate a crisis response team** of at least three people, including at least one woman, to respond to congregants in crisis. The team may respond to other types of crisis such as serious illness or loss, but they should be specifically equipped to support those who have experienced clergy sexual abuse. This means:

- Offering immediate support (even if just by being present and listening).
- Believing the victim until clear evidence contradicts their report.
- Focusing on helping the victim feel safe and supported.

To prepare for this role, team members should:

- Seek training to understand the effects of trauma and learn to use trauma-sensitive language and behaviors.
- Prepare a list of community resources (counselors, crime victim support, etc), church or denomination resources, and online support resources such as The Hope of Survivors ([www.thehopeofsurvivors.com](http://www.thehopeofsurvivors.com)).

**Designate an abuse investigation team** of at least two people, including at least one woman. In smaller congregations, this may be the same as the crisis response team. The team's role is to:

- Interview all people with care, compassion, and understanding.
- Ask hard and pointed questions if necessary to obtain information.
- Objectively gather facts from the victim, accused offender, and witnesses.
- Make a determination of what happened, using a threshold of preponderance of evidence. Is there greater than 50% likelihood that abuse occurred? This is not a court of law, but a caring and thoughtful community of believers who want to support vulnerable people, hold offenders accountable, keep victims from further harm, and prevent another offense – in other words, to do justice.
- Document the process and findings.
- Recommend action (remove or discipline the offender, report the offender for criminal charges, etc). When considering options, be sure to seek the victim's opinion. Share the recommendation with the person(s) who have the power take action, such as deacons, bishops, church council, or denominational leaders.
- Throughout the process, assist church leaders in communicating with the congregation about the complaint and the response process.

## HELPING VICTIMS FIND HEALING

**Believe and affirm the victim.** This cannot be stated often enough. A skeptical or uncaring first response will create more trauma. Affirm that the victim has been betrayed by someone they had a right to trust.

**Offer resources immediately.** Victims need to know where to find support within the community or through the church denomination. In addition, they may want to talk with others who have survived clergy sexual abuse. Share with them the list of community, denomination, and online resources prepared by the crisis response team (see previous page), and encourage them to seek as much support as they need.

**Use trauma-sensitive language and actions.** Learn to recognize the symptoms and impact of trauma, and work actively to avoid re-traumatizing the victim. Online resources such as [www.samhsa.gov/nctic/trauma-interventions](http://www.samhsa.gov/nctic/trauma-interventions) may be helpful.

**Acknowledge that their journey will be difficult.** Let them know that the church investigation will take time and may be confusing and stressful. Let them know that church leaders are committed to their healing.

**Provide an advocate** to support the victim and keep them informed throughout the process.

**Be sensitive to gender.** If the victim is a woman, always have another woman present in conversations or meetings.

**Watch for Stockholm Syndrome.** Many victims feel affection for their offenders and may seek to protect them, or may even try to take responsibility for the sexual abuse. Be patient and gentle as you help the victim understand the trauma and betrayal they have endured.

**“What happened to you was not your fault.”** The victim may need to hear these words many times, especially if they believe that they consented to or cooperated with the abuse. Let them know that the minister is always the one responsible for maintaining safe boundaries with a congregant.

**Protect the victim from their offender.** Never attempt to force a meeting between the victim and the accused clergy member. Never question the victim in the presence of the accused clergy member. Church leaders should offer appropriate support to the accused minister, but the victim’s need for healing should have top priority.

**Don’t silence the victim.** They have a right to talk about what happened to them. Telling their story – as often as they need to, any way they need to, to anyone they need to tell – is vital to the process of healing.

**Make sure the victim feels welcome** to stay in the congregation if they want to. For many victims, their faith community is their most important source of support.

**Communicate clearly and often** with the victim. They need to know how the process works and approximately how long each step will take. Invite their questions, and answer them as fully as possible.

**Involve the victim as much as possible** in how the situation will be communicated with others, what information will be shared, and when communications will take place. Note that it may not always be possible to heed the victim's request. Even if the victim has asked for a secret response, the congregation needs to know when their minister has been accused of harmful behavior.

**Protect the victim's story and identity**, but do not conceal the basic fact that the church is investigating a serious complaint against a leader. The congregation has a right to know if their minister has been accused of harmful behavior, especially since there may be other victims. Know the difference between confidentiality (which protects the victim) and secrecy (which protects and enables the abuser).

**Pay for counseling** for the victim and their family, with no limit on number of sessions or dollars. The victim's healing is the church's foremost responsibility, and this offer is a tangible way to show it.

## HEALING THE CONGREGATION

**The congregation is wounded too.** All members of the congregation, including other leaders or staff, are secondary victims of the abuse. They need to know that a leader has been accused of sexually abusing a member of the congregation, a staff member, or a junior member of the clergy, that the charges are being investigated, and that the church will take any necessary action to bring justice and restore safety and trust.

**Don't mince words: call it abuse.** When a minister takes sexual advantage of a congregant or other person in his or her care, **it is not an "affair" or a "moral slip."** It is an egregious abuse of power that may make it impossible for the offender to continue in ministry.

**Help the congregation support the victim.** Many congregants will not know what to do, so they will do nothing. The victim may interpret their silence as a shunning or a virtual excommunication. When the victim's identity is known, encourage congregants to pray and show support. When the victim remains anonymous, encourage the congregation to pray for the victim's healing.

**Apologize to the congregation.** The incident(s) of abuse occurred on someone's watch, and the congregation has been wounded. Church leaders or authorities need to take responsibility for the institutional failure, apologize to the congregation, and pledge to take the actions needed to prevent another occurrence. Legal experts may be able to offer guidance on how to do this.