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# Responding with Excellence to an Allegation of Sexual Abuse within the Church

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“My child just told me that the youth pastor has been having sex with her for the past three months.” Every church leader dreads this phone call. It’s what keeps pastors awake at night—in fear and trembling. Worst of all, these are conversations that often eventually drive abuse victims and their families out of the church. The anxiety that consumes pastors when responding to disclosures of such evil are often fueled by church leaders and members being uneducated on abuse and wholly ill-prepared to properly respond to this most egregious of offenses.

It’s not a matter of if, but when, a church is faced with reports of child sexual abuse perpetrated by a member of their own community, whether it be pastoral staff, a volunteer, or a member of the congregation. All too often, this alleged offender will be a widely respected, influential, and well-loved individual.<sup>2</sup> How a faith institution confronts and responds to such a disclosure will not only have potential to save or destroy lives but will also speak volumes about whether it places the lives of individuals over the reputation and life of the institution. The purpose of this article is to provide some fundamentals on effective ways for congregations to respond to child sexual abuse disclosures.<sup>3</sup>

**Contact the authorities.** When a pastor or church leader receives a disclosure of child sexual abuse, one of the first questions that should be asked is, “Has this been reported to the proper authorities?” If it hasn’t been reported, one of the first steps should be to encourage and direct the person disclosing the abuse to immediately contact the authorities. The pastor should also inform the person that he/she will be reporting the allegation as well. Often one of the most pastoral responses to a disclosure is for the pastor to accompany the individual in reporting the offense.

As I work with congregations and other Christian institutions,

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I often encounter professing Christians who struggle with whether they should first report suspected child abuse to the civil authorities. A church elder once told me that if he received a disclosure of child sexual abuse, his first response would be to interview the alleged victim. His rationale was that he wanted to “be sure that the allegations are legitimate before reporting to the police and ruining the man’s reputation.” When asked what training he had to conduct a child forensic interview, the man was silent. When asked whether he wanted the responsibility to determine the validity of a very serious felony, he started to shrink back in his chair. I then asked whether he was prepared to violate mandated reporting laws. Fortunately, the elder got my point, changed his opinion, and acknowledged his need to learn more about child sexual abuse. An issue often at the heart of this critical struggle is whether the Church is obligated to subject itself to the laws of humans when it believes that it is capable to address the sin “in-house.”

Let’s make sure we all understand one important truth: child sexual abuse is both a sin AND a serious crime. In order to effectively carry out its responsibility of protecting children and

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1. The author is the executive director of Godly Response to Abuse in the Christian Environment (GRACE).

2. See the book review: “Predators, Pedophiles, Rapists, and other Sexual Offenders by Anna Salter,” in *Violence Against Women*, Vol. 11 No. 1, January 2005: 139–142 [https://scholars.unh.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?referer=https://www.google.com/&httpsredir=1&article=1103&context=soc\\_facpub](https://scholars.unh.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?referer=https://www.google.com/&httpsredir=1&article=1103&context=soc_facpub) (last accessed on May 18, 2018).

3. What is provided in this section only scratches the surface on the numerous and complex issues related to how congregations respond to a child sexual abuse disclosure. However, it is my hope and prayer that what is provided will be enough to help church leaders see and understand the need to learn more.

punishing perpetrators, all fifty states have laws that mandate certain citizens to report suspected neglect or abuse of children. Violation of mandated reporting laws not only fails to protect children, but also enables the perpetrator to avoid criminal prosecution. Scripture says, “For the one in authority is God’s servant for your good.”<sup>4</sup> This clearly indicates that a central purpose of civil government is to do good. If that is the case, can there be any greater good carried out by civil government than to enforce laws designed to protect society’s most vulnerable members? In order to carry out this good, the authorities must be notified of the alleged offense, regardless of whether such a report is required by law. Governments are incapable of protecting little ones and holding offenders accountable if citizens remain silent in the face of such evil. When in doubt, report!

**Care for the victim.** The safety and care of the alleged victim must always come first. When the victim and the alleged offender are part of the same faith community, the initial response by the institution is often to try and figure out an equitable way to address the matter without “offending” either party. Such an approach will always fail. It is critical for church leaders to understand that their ultimate responsibility is to protect and care for the most vulnerable members of their church. Jesus was always on the side of the vulnerable and the wounded. The focus of the Good Samaritan was to ensure that the badly victimized traveler was brought to safety and provided whatever was necessary for healing. The Samaritan didn’t seem to care if his actions offended those who had inflicted the wounds. Isn’t that the ultimate story of the Gospel? Jesus stepped into our vulnerable and wounded lives in order to bring us safety and ultimate healing. As we respond to abuse disclosures, our focus should mirror that of the ultimate Good Samaritan. We must filter every decision with this question: *How does this decision protect and care for the alleged victim?* Caring for and protecting the reported victim can be lived out by the congregation in many ways, including:

**Taking the time to listen—and learn.** Those who care best listen most. This was most evidenced by the life of Jesus. The wounded and broken were drawn to him because he took time to listen and learn about each of them. By doing so, he was approachable and safe. One of the first steps in demonstrating care for the wounded is to consciously create a community where he/she feels safe and heard.

**Always put the victim first.** The concern and care for the reported victim must take priority, even if it doesn’t seem fair to the alleged offender. For example, if the child is an attendee of the church, he/she must never be placed in a position of having to encounter the alleged offender on the church property. That may require church leaders to direct the accused to remain away from the church until further notice. Such directives will be seen by some (especially those who are friends with the alleged offender) to be harsh and unfair. The reality is that this type

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of approach demonstrates a church culture that prioritizes the traumatized over the inconvenienced.

**Assign a member of leadership as a liaison who will be in regular contact with the victim and the family** to walk with them through this deeply traumatic season. If possible, it is best to select a leadership representative who already has an existing relationship with the family. Prior to serving in this role, it is recommended that this person receive training on abuse and victimization. Such training can be through a reputable organization or through the reading of a reputable book on the subject. Furthermore, it’s important to make sure that this representative understands his/her role and limitations. For example, the representative should not attempt to engage in counseling, but could work with the family in connecting them with a qualified counselor. Such roles and limitations must be clearly spelled out prior to serving this family in need.

**In addition to a liaison, the leadership should work to develop a support network** within the congregation especially during court-related matters. Walking through the judicial process can be a very difficult, lonely, and re-traumatizing process for many victims and their families. A support network can help shoulder these burdens while also providing practical assistance such as child care during court hearings, meals during the trial, and words of encouragement and support along the way.

**Always look through the lens of the child.** A child sexual abuse survivor once told me, “Don’t ever stop seeing through the eyes of the child victim.” It is natural to approach and respond to a crisis through the lens of our own life experiences or through the collective lens of those responding to the crisis. When responding to disclosures of child sexual abuse, church leaders must be intentional about viewing every decision through the lens of the child victim. If a decision or the consequences of it could be seen by a child as hurtful, dismissive, confusing, or even demonstrating greater care for the alleged offender, it’s a poor decision and must not be made. Looking through the lens of the child victim not only empathizes with the wounded, but it also tells the child that they are worthy and supported.

**Seek outside expertise.** Most church leaders are educated and trained to be church leaders. That may sound like an oversimpli-

4. Rom 13:4 [English Standard Version].

fied statement, but it is often forgotten by church leaders when responding to a crisis such as a disclosure of child sexual abuse. The truth is that even if a pastor or church leader has received some training on this issue, they still don't have the needed tools in their toolbox to effectively address the many complex issues and dynamics associated with sexual abuse. Furthermore, if the alleged perpetrator is a colleague or member of the church community, the church leader will undoubtedly struggle with an actual or perceived conflict of interest. Not having the right tools coupled with the strong possibility of a conflict of interest, is a recipe for poor decisions that can have a lifetime affect upon the victim and many others inside and outside of the church. Obtaining the assistance of those who have experience and expertise with understanding and addressing matters related to child sexual abuse will provide church leaders with a toolbox filled with the resources needed to see through the lens of the child in making informed decisions. The expert must be an individual or organization that is trained and experienced with understanding the complex dynamics of abuse, the common behavioral patterns of abusers, and working with and serving those who have been abused. It's also very helpful if the expert has experience addressing abuse related issues within the context of faith communities. The type of expert needed is not a management attorney, nor a public relations firm. The type of expert needed is someone such as a former child sexual abuse investigator, prosecutor, or an organization comprised of a multi-disciplinary group of professionals who are trained and experienced with addressing issues related to the abuse of children within faith communities. It is critical to remember that this expert is not needed to help protect the congregation, but to ensure that the congregation responds properly to abuse disclosures with a focus on how best to love and serve the wounded.

**Shepherd the accused.** Merriam-Webster defines "shepherd" as "to guide or guard in the manner of a shepherd."<sup>5</sup> The primary responsibility of church leaders when addressing a member who has been accused of sexually abusing a child is to guide and guard the rest of the church body, especially the children. Repeated studies have found that only between 1–7 percent of child sexual abuse allegations are false.<sup>6</sup> Thus, at least 93 percent of such allegations are true. These statistics should mean that church leaders don't give the accused the benefit of the doubt when it comes to making decisions regarding protective measures that will restrict his/her activities within the life of the congregation.<sup>7</sup> Immediate restrictions should include prohibiting the accused from being on the church property, and from participating in church-sponsored functions. If the alleged offender is an employee of the church, he/she must be immediately placed upon administrative leave until

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further notice.<sup>8</sup> Properly shepherding not only necessitates the imposition of restrictions, but it also requires that leaders clearly communicate to the accused that though they aren't going to take sides, their decisions will be based upon the best interests of the child. How the accused responds to such a directive will often set the tone for how he/she will respond to future shepherding. As part of the shepherding process, a leader should be assigned to be in constant and open communication with the accused and his/her family providing prayer and spiritual guidance. For example, if the alleged offender is prohibited from attending church services, he/she could be encouraged to listen to the weekly sermons and meet with the liaison on a regular basis to discuss them.<sup>9</sup> It is also the responsibility of the liaison to ensure that neither the accused nor his/her family are engaging in behaviors or communications that are hurtful to the reported victim or the victim's family.<sup>10</sup>

One of the more significant (and difficult) roles of shepherding the accused is the need for church leadership to eventually confront him/her on the abuse allegations. It is critical that such a confrontation be done with the assistance of the expert and only after conferring with the investigating agency. Timing is everything.<sup>11</sup>

The length of this article prohibits me from addressing other critically important issues related to shepherding accused offenders. For example, what should church leaders do if and when the authorities decide not to prosecute? Or, what if the accused is prosecuted but found "not guilty" at trial? These questions and more can and should be addressed by church leaders in conjunction with expert assistance.

**Congregational care.** As church leaders rush to respond to child sexual abuse allegations, they often overlook an important group of people who are closely watching the situation and the decisions being made. Statistics tell us that one in four women and one in six

8. These types of restrictions must be implemented until the church leadership is in a better position to obtain additional information to assess a host of issues related to the allegations, the victim, and whether the accused poses any risk to others. Often, this information is best obtained and assessed with the assistance of law enforcement and a child protection expert.

9. Most churches post their sermons online.

10. This can take many forms. Some include, open threats, bad-mouthing the victim/family, or the accused claiming to be the "real victim" in an effort to seek sympathy from church members.

11. If there is an ongoing criminal investigation, church leaders should never do anything that could compromise the investigation.

5. See <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/shepherd> (last accessed on May 18, 2018).

6. See <http://www.leadershipcouncil.org/1/res/csa-acc.html> (last accessed on May 18, 2018).

7. Such restrictions can be outlined in a limited access agreement with the accused. See *The Child Safeguarding Policy Guide*, by Shira Bercovits and Basyle Tchividjian, (Greensboro, N.C.: New Growth Press, 2017), 111–117.

men will be sexually abused before the age of eighteen.<sup>12</sup> To keep the math simple, that means in a church with 100 men and 100 women, 20.5 percent of the congregation are child sexual abuse survivors. This is a sobering reminder that our churches are filled with abuse survivors, most of whom are still struggling in some way with the lifelong pains caused by this trauma. Sexual assault survivors are at a heightened risk for developing post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), which can be triggered when learning of other abuse disclosures.<sup>13</sup> Throughout the process of responding to the underlying abuse disclosure, it is vitally important that the leadership send a clear message that the church is a safe place that welcomes and affirms survivors of abuse. This message can come in different forms such as:

- Informing the congregation about the allegations of abuse and directing parents to local resources and professionals who can help determine if their child was also victimized.<sup>14</sup>
- Making sure the congregation knows that the leadership has taken immediate measures to ensure the safety of their children.
- Appointing a pastor or staff member who can encourage and assist other abuse survivors with getting connected to qualified local resources such as professional counselors.
- Engaging outside professional assistance to train and equip both the leadership and general membership on matters related to child protection.<sup>15</sup>
- Preaching sermons on the sin of sexual abuse and those who perpetrate it.<sup>16</sup>

These are just a few of many steps church leaders can take to care for a hurting congregation that often finds itself triggered, confused, and sometimes frustrated when child sexual abuse allegations surface.<sup>17</sup> Being intentional about creating specific ways to care for and serve the church body can bring hope and healing to many during a dark and difficult season in the life of the congregation.

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12. See <https://www.nsopw.gov/en-US/Education/FactsStatistics?AspxAutoDetectCookieSupport=1#reference> (last accessed on May 18, 2018).

13. See <https://www.ptsd.va.gov/public/ptsd-overview/women/sexual-assault-females.asp> (last accessed on May 18, 2018).

14. The details of the abuse and the identity of the victim should not be disclosed. Furthermore, it is highly recommended that church leaders seek counsel from the law enforcement agency investigating the allegations regarding the content of what will be shared with the congregation.

15. Such as the GRACE Child Safeguarding Certification Initiative. See <http://www.netgrace.org/certification/>.

16. In preparation for such sermons, I highly encourage pastors to spend much time researching the topic, learning from experts, and speaking with and listening to, abuse survivors.

17. For additional ways congregations can serve abuse survivors, see “7 ways to welcome abuse survivors in our churches” at <https://religionnews.com/2014/05/16/7-ways-welcome-abuse-survivors-churches/> (Last accessed on May 18, 2018).

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**Policy protocol.** A proper and informed response to child sexual abuse disclosures within a congregation should be outlined in a written abuse response protocol that is developed by the church with the assistance of child protection experts.<sup>18</sup> This will provide a much-needed roadmap to church leaders who will often find themselves tempted to make uninformed off-the-cuff decisions when responding to dire circumstances. Such a decision-making process can have devastating consequences. This may be okay when you're deciding on the color of the church carpet, but not when it involves responding to disclosures of child sexual abuse. Having a response protocol is a tremendous tool for ensuring that the decisions made by church leaders who learn of abuse are informed and consistently applied in a manner that best serves all parties.

Congregations who put in the time up front to do the hard work in preparing for the moment when that dreaded call is received will be uniquely positioned to respond in a way that reflects the love and hope of Jesus amid incomprehensible pain. The invaluable lives of those made in God's image deserve nothing less.

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18. See Bercovits and Tchividjian, *The Child Safeguarding Policy Guide*, chapters 10–13.