



The Introductory Guide to Caring Well

A RESOURCE TO HELP CHURCHES CARE WELL FOR
SURVIVORS OF SEXUAL ABUSE AND IMPLEMENT
POLICIES AND PROCEDURES TO PREVENT ABUSE

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INTRODUCTION

Over the past few years, our country has had a public reckoning with how widespread sexual abuse is throughout all areas of our society. One out of three women and one out of four men have experienced sexual violence involving physical contact at some point in their lives. But these staggering statistics only begin to tell the story. Actual incidences of sexual abuse far exceed reported incidences of sexual abuse as most survivors do not report their abuse. As was detailed in the [Caring Well Report](#) released by the Sexual Abuse Advisory Group, churches are not immune to these statistics. In fact, there are men and women sitting in your pews this week who have survived sexual abuse.

Yet, knowing where to begin to minister to survivors and to protect a congregation from abuse can feel overwhelming and confusing. What do you do when someone discloses abuse to your church leadership? How can you develop policies to better protect your most vulnerable members? How can you screen and train your staff and volunteers to improve the safety and security of your ministries?

The answers to these questions are complex. While there are principles that apply to every church, each church will have to consider their specific context to best implement effective policies and procedures. This is because every church is different: spaces are different, demographics are different, programs are different, congregational size is different. There is no one-size-fits-all approach to making a church a safer place for children.

This guide is designed to provide a starting point for church leaders who are working to implement effective policies and procedures in their congregations in order to care for survivors and help prevent future abuse. Our aim is not to provide a set of minimum standards but rather to raise questions and provide basic principles for your church to consider when setting policies for child protection. Although each congregation should work with professionals and local authorities to determine the best course of action for their unique setting, this guide is a starting point for church leaders. Whether you are reviewing existing care policies or creating them for the first time, this guide will walk you through practical steps to take as you seek to prevent abuse and care well for survivors. This guide aims to provide a foundation of topics to think through, provides sample language and policies provided by leading sexual abuse prevention advocates, and links to further resources to help you dive deeper into each area of prevention and care.

***Disclaimer:** The information contained in this document is general in nature and is not intended to provide, or be a substitute for, legal analysis, legal advice, or consultation with appropriate legal counsel. You should not act or rely on information contained in this document without seeking appropriate professional advice. By printing and/or distributing this guide, the Ethics & Religious Liberty Commission is not providing legal advice.*

Additionally, this document is not a comprehensive guide for how to help protect your church from abuse and how to care for survivors. It is simply a starting point. Each church should consult legal and professional advice from local professionals to determine the best course of action for your congregation. This document does not and is not intended to establish a standard of care for preventing or handling a report of sexual abuse within a church.

For additional questions, email caringwell@erlc.com.

Caring Well Team

A helpful place to begin preparing your church to care for survivors and prevent future abuse is to create a Caring Well Team.

WHY HAVE A CARING WELL TEAM (CWT)

This team will coordinate your church's efforts as you implement policies and procedures to help your church be safer for survivors and to help protect against abuse. Specifically, a CWT will:

Encourage

This team allows parents and survivors in your church to know you take this issue seriously and are seeking to care for and protect the congregation.

Deter

Having a team who is focused on this issue puts perpetrators on notice that you take this issue seriously. This may act as a deterrent because perpetrators will go where they have the easiest access to victims.

Communicate

This team will be able to focus their energies on this important issue and help your church's initial commitment become more than just good intentions. They will serve as a conduit for your church's efforts to move from ideas to implementation.

WHO SHOULD BE ON THE CARING WELL TEAM?

For some churches, this team should be comprised of a small group of key leaders from your pastoral staff, student ministry, children's ministry, women's ministry, or marriage ministry. Other churches may have church members who could contribute expertise or a unique perspective. Consider your

specific church context to decide what will serve best. Because this is such a pressing issue, your most trusted leaders should be eager to support the effort.

Also, consider what individuals you have in your congregation who might bring expertise and experience to the team. If you have church members with a background in social work, law enforcement, counseling, or education—fields experienced in responding to abuse—they would make excellent team members. If you have a church member who has experienced abuse and is far enough along in their recovery for this to be a healthy experience for them, he or she would offer an immensely valuable perspective. It's also important to include both men and women.

WHAT WILL THEY BE RESPONSIBLE FOR?

The CWT will be responsible for reviewing and implementing policies and procedures for abuse prevention and care for survivors. That will involve everything from learning about abuse, communicating with the leadership about next steps, attending training, reviewing current policies and recommending necessary revisions, and helping implement and maintain a screening process for volunteers.

HOW CAN THEY BE TRAINED FOR THEIR ROLE?

Before your church begins to implement changes, it is important to ensure that your leaders are well trained on the issue of abuse. The [Caring Well Challenge](#) is designed to walk the team step by step through the process to help them share about abuse, care for those who have been abused, and to prepare to prevent abuse.

For example, a number of talks, panels, and keynotes from the [Caring Well Conference](#) are available online. Also, step five is to go through the [*Becoming a Church that Cares Well for the Abused*](#) curriculum. This is a free, 12-video curriculum. Each video is 20 minutes and is available in English and Spanish. At the conclusion of the training you will be advised to send select videos to key lay leaders in your church to help train them as well. Churches are also encouraged to pursue additional training from state conventions, associations, and other partners.

WHAT IF WE ALREADY HAVE SOMETHING LIKE A CARING WELL TEAM?

Some churches already have teams of leaders in place that function similarly to the design of a CWT. If that is your church, that's great news: you are already on track. Unless it fits your plans and priorities, there is no need to rename or modify an existing team into a CWT. Ensure they are functioning in a way that will enable your church to better prevent abuse and care for survivors.

Screening Policy For Workers and Volunteers

It is critical that churches have a rigorous process of recruiting and screening employees and volunteers within child- and student-serving ministries for compatibility with the church's values and child protection policies. A rushed recruitment and search process for volunteers or staff to meet a staffing shortage can place children and youth in danger.

A rigorous process of recruitment and hiring allows the church to properly vet and learn whether the person is a good fit for the ministry position. The process must include time and place for evaluation and discovery of potential red flags.

With this in mind, look at the hiring and recruitment process as an opportunity for the ministry to get to know the applicant and for the applicant to get acquainted with the ministry. Good hiring and recruitment policies and practices for both employees and volunteers will lower risk and increase safety for children and youth within your church.

Once your policies and procedures are established, it is crucial that all of your ministries follow the processes put in place. If the process is not realistic, consider revising your policies. It is imperative that your policies and practices match.

Some of the things churches should consider as they implement a screening process for employees and volunteers are:

- [Written application](#)
- [Background check](#)
- [Reference checks](#)
- [Interview](#)
- [Social media review](#)
- [Orientation and training](#)

WRITTEN APPLICATION

A written application allows you to gain a lot of information in an efficient manner. The application should have all of the standard types of questions, but should also include questions to evaluate employees and volunteers from a child protection perspective. Some suggested questions your written application could include are as follows:

- Please list all experience you have working with children/youth. Include any paid positions, babysitting, volunteer positions, summer jobs, camps, or church work. Please provide start date, reason for leaving, position and responsibilities, supervisor, and contact information.
- Have you ever been suspended, asked to leave, or fired from a job? Please explain.
- Have you ever been suspended or expelled from high school or college? Please explain.
- Have you ever been convicted of a crime? Please list dates and nature of offense.
- Have you ever been accused of hurting or abusing a child?
- Have you ever been asked to step down from a position of leadership in a church? Please explain time frame and details.
- Describe an area where you need improvement or is challenging for you in working with children or youth.
- What characteristics do you possess that make you a good fit for working with children/youth?

You may also need to obtain written permission from an applicant to check all previous employment and volunteer positions related to the

applicant's work with children, including references not listed by the applicant.

BACKGROUND CHECK

Background checks are necessary but are never a guarantee that a person is safe. Background checks are only effective after someone has been caught and so background checks alone can provide a false sense of security. While it is necessary to complete a background check on all staff and volunteers, it should never be your only screening mechanism, because they serve as an initial screen and deterrent.

Background checks also need to be done on a reoccurring basis. Reoccurring background checks may reveal red flags that occurred after the staff or volunteer began work at your church. Some companies that provide background checks provide ongoing checks as a part of the service.

Veteran law enforcement agent and background check expert Mike McCarty highlights the dangers that churches who rely solely on simple background checks face:

Churches and ministries are flooded with cheap background check solutions from a highly unregulated background screening industry. There is no such thing as a single, complete database of criminal records, not even the FBI. Sexual predators are highly motivated and the current church and ministry approach to background screening is no match. Protecting children and the ministry requires a complex approach that includes training, comprehensive background checks, reference checks and the development and implementation of security teams.¹

When choosing a background check provider, it is important to choose an option that is comprehensive. Look for an option that includes the following:

- a Social Security number verification to validate identity, other names, and develop address history
- a multistate or national criminal database search and county criminal search
- the scope of the search should be as far back as the records allow
- real-time arrest alerts, which notify you any-time that the person is arrested in the future.

Conducting a comprehensive background check on each staff member and volunteer may require a small increase in your budget for this area, but it will be well worth the investment.

Johnson Ferry Baptist Church, a Southern Baptist congregation, is one church that has decided to make this investment. Their director of human resources, Jill Kearney, explains their decision:

Johnson Ferry takes seriously protecting our minors, elderly, employees, volunteers and the church as a whole. In an effort to do ministry with excellence, which is a core value of our church, we decided to dig deeper in our background check process, inevitably increasing costs. If this helps us to protect our minors and the elderly from abuse of any kind, we view this as being a good steward of what the Lord has blessed us with.

The church safety team should make a decision beforehand on what results are acceptable and unacceptable and adhere to the same set of policies for everyone. This avoids favoritism and improves the screening process. If something is disclosed

¹ Safe Hiring Solutions- Background Screening, "Leadership Team," accessed May 29, 2019, <https://www.safehiringsolutions.com/leadership-team>

through the background check that causes you to be unsure how to proceed, seek legal counsel.

REFERENCE CHECKS

Reference checks are an essential part of screening for employees and volunteers. A reference is not helpful unless you follow through and actually talk to the references. Reference checks should always occur prior to making a staff or volunteer placement decision and should be taken seriously.

View the list of employers, volunteer supervisors, and personal references as data points that should be pursued in order to verify the person is who he says he is and does not have any red flags from previous employment or ministry work. Employment references should be verified for accuracy and job performance. Other churches or ministries where the applicant has served should be contacted regarding those positions and the individual's interaction with children and youth. It can also be helpful to obtain a reference from a past church, a family member, or at least one person of the opposite sex.

Some questions that may be informative when interviewing references are as follows:

- Please verify the position, responsibilities, and start and end date of the applicant.
- What was your relationship with the applicant, and how long did you know him/her?
- Please describe the applicant's interaction with children/youth.
- Please describe the applicant's interaction with supervisors and those in authority.
- What strengths does the applicant possess in working with children/youth?
- What weaknesses or challenges did the applicant have in working with children/youth?
- Do you have any hesitancy in recommending this applicant to work with children/youth?

- Would your organization have this person back in the future?

Here is an [example of a reference request form](#) used by a Southern Baptist church.

INTERVIEW

An interview is a time to be face-to-face with the applicant or potential volunteer. Direct questions about prior jobs and interaction with children and youth are helpful. It is also a time for you to educate the applicant about your church/ministry area and your vision and priority for child protection. Let them know that you screen, train, have clear policies in place, and report abuse.

When educating about your church, review your child protection policies during the interview and ask if the person has any questions or concerns with following the policies. The applicant's reaction may be a helpful indicator of the level of buy-in to child protection, but some predators may not give any indication at all. Efforts by the applicant to push back on the boundaries of the established policies or to seek exceptions are a red flag.

Predators look for soft targets. By communicating you have policies that you enforce and evaluate, you make yourself less inviting for predators and send a clear message about the value you place on children and your priority of keeping them safe from harm. At the same time, you are learning more about the applicant and whether he or she is a good fit from the perspective of beliefs, background, safety, experience, demeanor, and responsibility.

Prepare before the interview by having a prepared list of questions and reviewing the applicant's written application. During the interview it is helpful to have at least two trained personnel to interview the applicant. This allows for multiple things to better happen at once: asking questions, observing non-verbals,

listening to answers, recording responses, and having more than one person's assessment.

SOCIAL MEDIA REVIEW

In an era in which most people have a social media presence, it is helpful to review an applicant's social media history for red flags or any content that could indicate improper behavior.

ORIENTATION AND TRAINING

The final step in the hiring and recruitment process is orientation and training of your new volunteers and employees regarding your ministry area and child protection policy. While this occurs after a decision to hire or an invitation for a volunteer to serve, solid training on policy and abuse dynamics must happen early and on a regular basis throughout one's service to the ministry. Many liability carriers require training on a one- to three-year basis, but consistent training, even in shorter modules, will reinforce the church's priority of abuse prevention and child safety.

It is imperative that *all* of your staff members and volunteers be required to attend training on how to prevent and identify sexual abuse. There are many excellent ministries and local agencies that are willing to come in to train your congregation. Although in-person training is recommended, as it allows participants to personally engage and ask questions during the training, there are many excellent online training resources as well.

Sample In-Person Training Programs

All of these programs have a fee for participation in the training.

- Darkness to Light's [Stewards of Children](#) Training
- [GRACE Safeguarding Initiative](#)
- [MinistrySafe](#)

- [Safe Hiring Solutions](#)
- [Zero Abuse Project's Keeping Faith](#): Empowering Faith Communities to Recognize and Respond to Child Abuse & Neglect

Sample Online Training Resources

Although we recommend in-person training for every church, these resources are helpful for supplemental training or for staff and volunteers who are unable to attend an in-person training.

- Darkness to Light [Online Training Modules](#): D2L has six different online child abuse training modules. There is a fee but you can access them at any time.
- [Darkness to Light's Two Minutes for Prevention](#): 25 videos that are 2 minutes each.
- Darkness to Light produced [two documentaries](#) that provide a deeper understanding of the experience of child sexual abuse survivors in a way that is educational. They provide insight on child sexual abuse through the voices of the survivors.
- [Freedom for the Captives](#) has a free 4-hour training that any church can use (they simply have to fill out a form on the FFTC website). A viewer can take the videos at their leisure, and each video has an online test so that a church can be sure a volunteer staff member working with students have completed the video and understood the basic information.
- [GRACE's Valued Conference Videos](#). On the GRACE website, there are several videos from the Valued Conference addressing child abuse in faith communities and anyone can link to them and use them in training.
- [MinistrySafe](#) provides a five-part online Sexual Abuse Awareness training program.
- [Ten Things Every Faith Community Should Know](#): On the website of Sacred Spaces, which works to address abuse within Jewish

communities, there is a helpful video of Victor Vieth teaching at a synagogue providing basic child abuse information.

- [Four Things Parents Should Know About Protecting Children](#). Also on the Sacred Spaces website, there is a workshop by Dr.

Shira Berkovits directed at parents and giving them some basic information about keeping their children safe.

- [Safe Ministry Online Training Program](#)
- Training on church safety by [Safe Hiring Solutions](#)

Best Practices and Protective Policies

“Policy is not something that is created and sits on a shelf. Policy is your guide and what you live by, not what you aspire to, but what you actually do—it is who you are.”

-SAMANTHA KILPATRICK, attorney and former prosecutor

Churches should develop and maintain a set of child protection policies that work together to keep children safe. Good policy in the area of child protection is meant to protect the individuals in your church, not just the church itself. In protecting individuals, you are in fact protecting the organization.

Every church’s policies will be tailored to their state laws, community resources, and size of congregation. It’s important that you develop policies that are right for your context. But it is even more important that you develop policies you can actually live by. The greatest risk you create for both children and your church is to create unrealistic policies that your church does not follow.

As God’s people, a church’s first priority should be protecting the vulnerable—people over the organization. *Care, not liability, should be our primary motivation in creating and maintaining good child protection plans.* We must change this mindset and understand that policy is a way to love and care for people well by keeping them safe from harm. Developing and operating consistently within good policy is God-honoring and a way to steward the trust that our congregation and the community puts in us to be watchful and protective of those who may not be able to protect themselves.

Formulating good policies, requiring compliance with these policies, and responding well to violations

of policy and disclosures of abuse are all ways that you protect and shepherd your congregation well.

FORM A CARING WELL TEAM (CWT) TO DEVELOP, REVIEW, AND IMPLEMENT POLICIES

To start, no matter where you are in the process, it helps to have a CWT that oversees the policy process. This CWT should be made up of individuals who work with children and youth both inside and outside the church. It is important that the CWT understand your church’s spaces and facilities and is well acquainted with the different aspects of your church’s ministries.

No matter the size of your church, the following types of people would be a helpful resource in formulating and reviewing policy: children’s minister, student minister, director of women’s ministry, a parent, a social worker, law enforcement, attorney, counselor, medical professional, and school teacher. Form a CWT that is adequate to cover multiple areas of expertise, share the workload, and maintain confidentiality, but keep it small enough that the group can get work accomplished and make meaningful steps toward creating a robust policy of protection.

Members of your CWT should understand abuse dynamics, have a strong desire to protect children

and make your church a safe place for those that are vulnerable, and be logical and practical in the way they seek to implement their ideas.

WHAT TO INCLUDE IN A SAFETY POLICY

When determining the specifics of policies, it is important to understand the increased responsibility when working with children. We recommend that you watch lesson 3 in the [*Becoming a Church that Cares Well for the Abused*](#) curriculum, so that you can understand the different ministry responsibilities when caring for children versus adults. When working with children and youth, we recommend that at a minimum, churches meet the [national standards](#) promulgated by the Centers for Disease Control for youth-serving organizations. Advocate Victor Vieth encourages, “Indeed true Christian witness would shatter these minimal standards and also implement policies to address not only sexual abuse within the church but also sexual abuse in the home, as well as physical abuse, neglect, emotional abuse, and witnessing violence.”²

Some important considerations for your policies include:

Check in/out procedure

Implement strict check in and check out policies that ensure children are only permitted to leave the classroom with a parent or adult with permission of the parents.

Hall monitor

Designate a volunteer to circulate throughout the building during services to ensure that no adults have children by themselves. This proactively shows potential predators that there is nowhere in the church where they can get a victim alone.

Two-deep policy / avoiding isolation

Require at least two unrelated adults or three deep that would include one unrelated adult to be present when a child is present in all circumstances. This ensures that a child will never be left alone with anyone who is not their parent.

Parents Classroom Participation Policy

In order to ensure that no adults who have not completed a rigorous background check are allowed access to children, do not allow parents to come inside the classroom when they are dropping off children.

Workers under 18 years of age

When considering student to teacher ratios for children’s ministry or for the two-deep policy, do not count students under 18 as workers. While the church wants to be a place where students learn to serve, background checks cannot be conducted effectively on minors. This policy ensures that the background checks are consistent across the board. The rest of the screening process should be done for student volunteers to screen for suitability or red flags.

Some forms and training may need to be revised or adapted for workers under the age of 18. Tchividjian and Berkovits offer a sample youth worker application in their book *The Child Safeguarding Policy for Churches and Ministries* (239-242). Sexual abuse training for youth may also need to be modified especially for younger youth in order to not traumatize them. One Southern Baptist church chose to secure a local counselor/seminary professor who was credentialed in Darkness to Light training to conduct live annual training events with their youth as an alternative to their training for adults.

²Victor I. Vieth, *On This Rock: A Call to Center the Christian Response to Child Abuse on The Life and Words of Jesus* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2018), 51.

“Known to your church” rule

A volunteer should be “known to your church” for a specified period of time and by a specified number of leaders in order to be eligible to volunteer. This may prove challenging for churches who rely on a large number of volunteers to keep their ministries running, but an appropriate policy is crucial in deterring predators and fully vetting those who will interact with the vulnerable among us. One veteran children’s minister at a Southern Baptist church encouraged churches to wait until a volunteer had six months of consistent attendance and engagement before allowing the potential children or student ministry volunteer to start the application process.

Open doors

Have an open door policy in your church, unless a door is outfitted with a full window. Full barriers allow for private areas that could easily be utilized by perpetrators. Leaders and activities should be observable and interruptible at all times.

Social media and communication policy

It is important to ensure that all communication between staff/volunteers and students is out in the open and approved by church leaders and the child’s parents. Social media, in particular, can be easily used for secret conversations, and thus clear guidelines should be established to protect children.

- Zero Abuse Project [has sample social media policies](#).
- [Safe Ministry](#) has developed [helpful suggestions to consider when developing social media guidelines](#) for your church:
 - Youth group members, their friends and parents should be directed to the Church or Youth Group’s official social media account e.g., Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat. Caution should be observed with the use of any sites that delete posts, images,

and comments. These accounts should be only used in a one directional manner, e.g., the church Snapchat account should not add, follow, or comment on any followers account. The information posted online should be limited to logistical purposes and basic encouragement. There should be at least two designated leaders whose role it is to moderate each account for accountability.

- Leaders can use closed (not secret) Facebook groups. The information posted on these groups should be for logistics, encouragement and prayer. There should be at least two designated leaders whose role it is to moderate the group for accountability. A senior leader (e.g., Youth Minister) should be informed of all groups. Leaders should never have a group with students only of the opposite gender.

They also recommend where possible, students should be directed to a group account rather than a leader’s individual account. Where an individual’s account is used this should occur in consultation with a senior leader (e.g., Student Minister). Strict guidelines should be developed when using this type of site. These would include but are not limited to:

- Youth should initiate friendships, following or adding to their account, not leaders.
- Ensure any text posted online is beyond reproach and cannot be misconstrued.
- Ensure all photos and videos posted or tagged are beyond reproach and cannot be misconstrued.
- All private conversations must be recorded and never deleted.
- No leader should use a social media platform for leader to youth interactions that allows anonymity, e.g., AskFM, KiK messenger etc.
- No leader should use a social media platform for leader to youth interactions that deletes

- posts, images, or comments (e.g., Snapchat).
- No leader should use video calling for leader to youth interactions.

Safe Ministry also notes that caution must be used when communicating with young people online. You must maintain transparency and be accountable for what you say. You must also take care with the message you intend to communicate through both the words and images you use as it may be perceived differently by those who view it.

Darkness to Light has developed talking points for [discussing internet safety with children](#).

Transportation policy

It is important to establish realistic and consistent guidelines for transportation to and from church events to prevent one-on-one settings and opportunities for perpetrators to gain access to victims under the guise of being “helpful” and offering rides.

Here is a [sample policy from Safe Ministry](#).

Overnight policy

Ensure that all overnight activities at the church maintain the 2-deep unrelated adult policy, avoiding any times of isolation between an adult and a child. Also, think through sleeping logistics to ensure that children are protected throughout the night. One person in each bed is best, but no adult should share a bed with a student unless it is that student’s parent. It is important to have many adult chaperones present throughout the entire event. Chaperones should be provided for each gender (i.e., male chaperones for male sleeping arrangements and female chaperones for female sleeping arrangements).

Respect for child’s privacy

Ensure that children are guaranteed privacy when they are changing or going to the bathroom. This includes thinking through a diapering procedure.

This applies to giving them privacy from both adults and other children. Not only should privacy be maintained in the church setting but also at off-site activities like retreats and church camps.

FURTHER RESOURCES TO HELP YOU DEVELOP POLICIES AND PROCEDURES

Here are a collection of sample policies and resources to help you begin to think through what protections you need to implement in your congregation to prevent abuse.

1. [Safe Ministries sample policies](#)
2. [Developing Effective Policies on Child Maltreatment](#) by Victor Vieth 
3. [The Child Safeguarding Policy Guide for Churches](#) by Boz Tchividjian and Shira M. Berkovits  
4. [Sample policies and free awareness training](#) by MinistrySafe
5. [GRACE Safeguarding Initiative](#): If a church goes through the GRACE certification program, they will have at least one expert help them in developing their policies.
6. [Safe Hiring Solutions provides resources](#) on how to incorporate sexual abuse prevention into your general safety policies for your church
7. [CDC policy guide](#): The Centers for Disease Control has an online guide on developing policies which includes sample questions for screening, etc.
8. Darkness to Light [sample code of conduct](#).
9. Zero Abuse Project has [information for parents](#) teaching their children about how to keep themselves safe. 
10. Darkness to Light has written about [how to make camp a safer experience](#) for children. 
11. How to talk to children [about body safety](#). 

Prepared for Disclosure

“One of the hardest things a survivor of sexual assault ever does is say these words out loud: I have been a victim of sexual assault. People often do not share this because of shame and unwarranted guilt that plagues them. So when someone tells you this deeply personal part of their story, you must be ready to listen and care without any hint of accusation.”

-TRILLIA NEWBELL, sexual abuse survivor, advocate & author

In order to be ready to respond well when a survivor of sexual violence discloses to you, as a pastor or church leader, it is imperative to understand the magnitude of such a disclosure. Lesson 5 of [*Becoming a Church who Cares Well for the Abused*](#) deals with this important topic.

Disclosure is not straightforward and may come in many different forms. Often survivors are only beginning to process what happened to them and will not use words like “abuse” or “assault.” They may minimize or downplay what happened to them. It is crucial to patiently listen and respond that you believe their story.

When a survivor discloses sexual abuse, whether it occurred within church walls or outside, occurred yesterday or 30 years ago, we must be prepared to meet their disclosure with compassion and action. We must recognize that our primary responsibility in caring well for survivors of abuse is to place their protection and care as paramount above all other considerations in the process. Boz Tchividjian reminds us, “Jesus was always on the side of the vulnerable and the wounded. . . . We must filter every decision with this question: How does this decision protect and care for the alleged victim?”³

To prepare well for disclosure, it is helpful to take the following steps:

1. [Develop a team of caregivers to walk alongside a survivor of abuse.](#)
2. [Develop a plan of action for reporting abuse to the appropriate authorities in compliance with state law.](#)
3. [Get to know your local agencies that work with survivors of abuse.](#)
4. Develop a survivor-care ministry.
5. Consult with local law enforcement about how to provide pastoral care for the accused perpetrator during the trial phase of proceedings.

CARE TEAM

It is important to identify key staff members, church leaders, and professionals to include on a care team to walk alongside a survivor who has disclosed abuse. Each scenario and survivor will be different, so the team needed may be different for each survivor as well. Pastors, elders, women’s ministry leaders, student ministry leaders, children’s ministry leaders, professional counselors, medical professionals, and attorneys are all examples of people who may need to be included on a team. The number of people on a care team will differ based on the situation, but a team of two to four individuals is typical.

³ Bayle J. Tchividjian, “Responding with Excellence to an Allegation of Sexual Abuse Within the Church,” *Currents in Theology and Mission* 45, no. 3 (2018): 42.

Here are three things to consider when developing care teams:

Consider the needs and agency of the survivor

Each survivor has walked through a unique nightmare. Some may need immediate medical or mental health attention. Others may simply need a listening ear for the time being as they process what has happened to them. Some may need help discerning their legal options for reporting and holding their perpetrator accountable. Others may be children where swift action is required to report the abuse and protect them from a dangerous situation.

Whatever actions need to be taken, it is imperative that we hear and respect the agency of the survivor. The survivor's agency, or ability to make their own free choices, was taken during the abuse, so the survivor should be allowed to determine when and how care proceeds. One survivor explained to our advisory group that upon her disclosure of rape on her Southern Baptist higher education campus, she was assigned a female counselor and told she must attend counseling with this specific counselor. Immediately in the session, the counselor asked the survivor questions that insinuated the rape was her fault. She dutifully attended the rest of the required counseling sessions, but was heartbroken and confused. It took over a decade later before she re-entered professional counseling and began to recognize and heal from her assault. Had she been empowered to decide when and where she would seek help from the very beginning, her story may have turned out very differently.

Additionally, it is crucial that we respond very delicately if the survivor is a child. Lesson 3 of *Becoming a Church who Cares Well for the Abused* will instruct you on the different responses

required for abuse against a minor and abuse against an adult. For example, expressing anger or disbelief can lead to even more confusion and trauma, causing the child to shut down. Children need to know that we believe them and that we will do everything we can to keep them safe. Even saying things like, "Let me go investigate," can signal to a child that we don't believe them, and they are not safe. Do not ask leading questions that could retraumatize the child, but instead ask open-ended questions like, "Then what happened?" But we must be careful here, we are not trained investigators.

Make sure to protect the survivor's confidentiality

Protecting the identity and story of the survivor is paramount. A survivor should be consulted about who they want to be told about their abuse. Although it is important to communicate with your congregation when abuse occurs, it is not necessary to identify the survivor or break their trust by divulging their identity. Include only those people who are necessary and have been welcomed by the survivor. Note that reporting obligations are constantly changing from state to state, even for adults. Quickly determine whether there is any reporting obligation that would necessitate a report that requires disclosure of the survivor's identity to the authorities.

Include men and women in the process

It is essential that the care team be made up of men *and* women. Both genders bring a unique and invaluable perspective.

REPORTING

The church should not act as an investigative body in criminal matters. When abuse is disclosed and investigation is needed, local law enforcement should be called. In the *Becoming a Church*

that *Cares Well for the Abused* curriculum, attorney Samantha Kilpatrick explains:

In my experience, churches make mistakes when they try to handle everything in-house. This is problematic because churches are not equipped in all of the proficiencies needed in an abuse situation. Church leaders are often hesitant to get the “government” involved—usually due to mistrust, coupled with a desire to handle abuse internally. Rather than mistrust, the church should view these authorities as a resource – God-ordained entities that have been put in place for the safety of those they serve and protect.⁴

The nature of the abuse disclosed will determine what types of reports should be made and to what entities. Each state will have different requirements about reporting sexual abuse and harassment of adults and sexual abuse of minors. Check your state’s reporting requirements through the national [Child Welfare Information Gateway](#).⁵ In some states, members of certain professions, like counselors and teachers, are mandatory reporters of child abuse. In other states, all adults are mandatory reporters.

But as Russell Moore has said, “The Kingdom is a mandatory reporting state.” As Christ’s ambassadors, we are not to hide any evil or abuse. If you believe that child abuse has occurred, you should report it to the appropriate authorities immediately.

If you are talking with an adult who has been abused as a child, a question that needs to be raised during this initial conversation is, “Does your abuser have any access to children at this time?”

If the answer is “Yes,” then it is reasonable to assume that children are at risk and a report should be made. And as discussed above, reporting obligations are constantly changing from state to state, so be sure your church knows what your requirements are and keeps those up to date.

However, when sexual violence happens to an adult, it is up to him or her to determine if he or she would like to report it to the authorities. It is important for you to advise the adult of his or her options and encourage the reporting of the abuse. As you are advising of options and encouraging reporting, make sure the survivor knows that you or someone from your Caring Well team is available to walk beside them through the process in whatever way they choose. Many times a perpetrator will be harming or have the potential to harm others, and reporting is the best way to stop him or her from causing any more harm. Lesson 3 of the [Becoming a Church that Cares Well for the Abused](#) curriculum is a helpful resource on the topic of reporting. It addresses pastors’ and ministry leaders’ roles and responsibilities when learning of abuse against both minors and adults, explains when reporting abuse is mandated, and how to help a survivor when the decision about pressing charges is theirs to make.

LOCAL PARTNERSHIPS

When someone in your church makes a disclosure of sexual abuse, it is imperative that you utilize local law enforcement and appropriate professionals who are trained and prepared to handle such difficult situations.

Reaching out to and developing relationships with your local police department, mental

⁴ Hambrick, *Becoming a Church*, 26.

⁵ “Mandatory Reporters of Child Abuse and Neglect,” *State Statutes Series* (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Children’s Bureau, 2016), <https://www.childwelfare.gov/topics/systemwide/laws-policies/statutes/mandat/>

health providers, department of child services, and domestic violence advocacy groups, among others, will provide you with the relationships you will need when a disclosure is made. Understanding the resources available to you in your community before a disclosure is made will help to take the pressure off in the midst of crisis and allow you to call in experts to walk alongside the survivor and your church community, who will undoubtedly be in a state of shock and unequipped to best deal with the situation.

Your local Child Advocacy Center (CACs) will be an invaluable resource to you when child abuse is discovered. CACs are designed to protect children from having to tell their traumatic stories of abuse over and over again. When a child makes a disclosure of abuse, he or she should be taken to a CAC where a trained interviewer will ask the right questions to record the child's story without retraumatizing him or her. From there, a team that includes medical professionals, law enforcement, mental health, prosecution, child protective services, victim advocacy, and other professionals can use the recorded interview to make decisions about how to proceed and protect the child.

SURVIVOR-CARE MINISTRY

Regardless if the sexual abuse disclosed is ongoing or happened many years ago, it is crucial to create a safe environment for survivors to heal within the context of the church. For a large congregation that may mean bringing professional counselors on to your staff to help survivors and their families walk through the aftermath of abuse. For smaller congregations, that may mean partnering with local nonprofits and agencies to develop

relationships so that you can easily refer survivors to counseling as needed. Whatever the capacity of your church, make sure you have curated resources ahead of time to help your congregants deal with the long-term aftermath of sexual abuse.

INTERACTING WITH THE ACCUSED PERPETRATOR

When determining a policy for how to deal with an accused perpetrator, it is crucial to remember our first priority is always to the survivor of abuse and protecting potential victims. According to the [National Sexual Violence Resource Center](#), false allegations of sexual violence overall fall between 2-10%. Thus, when it comes to accusations involving children, it is wise for us to receive disclosures as credible until outside professionals demonstrate otherwise. Assuming innocence can endanger children.

Churches should consider immediate action in several areas when dealing with accusations of child sexual abuse, including access to church property and events during the deliberative process. Because a church is a place that cares for children, our standard of access should be at least as strict as a school's standard would be during this period. In such a case, it may be wise to assign the accused a church leader to act as their liaison to the church. You can encourage them to listen to sermons online and send prayer requests through their liaison, but it is important to set strict and immediate boundaries to protect the survivors and the rest of the congregation.

Admittedly, deciding the exact parameters to put in place is complex. It is wise to have law enforcement and other local experts help you make these types of decisions.

Are You Ready For a Disclosure?

IT IS IMPORTANT TO IDENTIFY WHEN AND HOW TO REPORT AHEAD OF TIME, SO THAT WHEN A DISCLOSURE IS MADE, YOU CAN ACT SWIFTLY. DEVELOP A PLAN THAT ADDRESSES THE FOLLOWING AREAS:

- We know our state's reporting laws for child and adult disclosures:
 - *Who must report*
 - *What must be reported*
 - *Timeframe it must be reported*
 - *Who to report it to*

- We know who to contact in the following areas:
 - *Police*
 - *Social Services*
 - *Community Resources*
 - *Legal Help*

- Our leadership and team have a list of phone numbers to contact them.

- We have a plan in place to address any allegation of sexual abuse and our staff and volunteers know the plan and their responsibility to report.

FURTHER RESOURCES TO HELP YOU PLAN FOR DISCLOSURE

- [Safe Ministry has developed forms for reporting.](#)
- Darkness to Light's [Guide for Reporting](#)
- [Brad Hambrick video on Ministry Grid:](#) Brad Hambrick, Pastor of Counseling at The Summit Church in Raleigh-Durham, discusses how to care for the victim, victim's parents, and perpetrator, all while cooperating with legal authorities, in the initial stages of response. Brad additionally provides downloadable sample response plans, sexual abuse allegation report forms, and recommended medical and counseling resources.
- [Child Sexual Abuse Response Plan-](#) Christianity Today has provided a guide to help you develop a sexual abuse response plan.
- The Lutheran Church Missouri Synod have [many resources for caregivers](#) in speaking to a child who has been sexually abused about their faith, including tips, specific prayers, and coloring pages. Scroll down to "documents and articles" to access these materials.
- [Child Abuse & the Church:](#) A special issue of *The Theological Journal of the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago and Wartburg Theological Seminary* on child abuse that has many articles to help pastors begin to care well for survivors. It addresses topics like the spiritual impact of abuse, coordinating medical and pastoral care in abuse, and toxic theology. The issue is open access so anyone can use any of the articles for reading and teaching.
- Darkness to Light- [Being the Trusted Adult:](#) How to react when a child discloses abuse to you.
- ["Implicit Messages & Spiritual Injury in Faith Communities":](#) GRACE provides this resource written by Laura Thein & Carrie Nettles
- [Freedom for the Captives articles:](#) The Freedom for the Captives website also has a number of articles that can be downloaded under the resources section.
- [GRACE articles:](#) GRACE also has articles that can be downloaded and used for training and directing.
- Author Victor Veith writes [Applying Law and Gospel to Victims and Perpetrators](#) in the *Journal of Psychology and Theology*.
- Justin and Lindsey Holcomb write on the GRACE website about [What to Say and What Not to Say to a Victim of Sexual Assault.](#)
- Diane Langberg's article, [The Spiritual Impact of Abuse](#) can be read on the GRACE website.

○ Discuss your policies and procedures with staff, volunteers, and congregation.

Develop a plan for how to update your church body on all that you have done to care well for your congregation in this area. It is important for everyone to know the new procedure and guidelines in place so that they can be a part of creating a safe environment. You want to do everything you can to create a safer environment for everyone where people feel heard and not minimized and are comfortable voicing their concerns. Additionally, making prevention policies clear and visible to all will act as a deterrent to any predators in your midst, letting them know that they will not have easy access to victims in your congregation.

FURTHER RESOURCES TO HELP YOU EQUIP YOUR ENTIRE CONGREGATION

- [“God Made All of Me”](#) by Justin and Lindsey Holcomb wrote a book parents can use in teaching their children personal safety.  

- The Jacob Wetterling Resource Center of the Zero Abuse Project has [lots of information for parents](#) in teaching their children personal safety and otherwise keeping them safe.
- Darkness to Light has developed tips for parents to help keep their children safe from abuse in specific settings, including:
 - [Checklist for Safer Sleepovers](#)
 - [Checklist for Safer Camp Experiences](#)
 - [Tips for Hiring Caregivers](#)
- [On This Rock: A Call to Center the Christian Response to Child Abuse on the Life and Words of Jesus](#) by Victor I. Vieth: In this book, Christian theologian and internationally recognized child abuse expert Victor Vieth examines the role of Jesus’ life and teachings in reducing child abuse in the New Testament world.  
- [7 Ways to Welcome Survivors in Our Churches](#)

○ Ensure you have proper liability insurance, including coverage for sexual misconduct.

○ Have a plan and schedule to review policies and practices moving forward.

Your Caring Well Team should review your policies and the implementation of those policies on a consistent basis. As your congregation changes

over the years it may present new safety challenges and require new safeguards.

- **Complete prevention and care training with staff and volunteers and have an ongoing plan and schedule for training moving forward.**

Conclusion

Sexual abuse has impacted many in the pews and people in the community. As J.D. Greear pointed out in the Sexual Abuse Advisory Group report at the 2019 SBC Annual Meeting, our response to sexual abuse is a gospel issue. He asked,

First, what greater lie could we illustrate about the gospel?

At its core, the gospel is about God's commitment to protect the vulnerable. The cross shows us that he is a safe refuge for all who run in repentance to him. What greater lie could we tell about the gospel than for us not to be doing whatever it

takes to make our churches safe places for the vulnerable?

Second, why would the lost trust us with a message of salvation if they are not sure if they can trust us with the safety of the vulnerable?

Why would survivors trust us to care for their souls if they are not sure if they can trust us to care for their wounds?

May churches use this guide as a starting point to take steps to make their church safe for survivors and safe from abuse.



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