

Responding to Abuse

A Toolkit for Churches

Second Edition

Why this resource?

Synod 1992 recognized that “abuse by clergy undermines the credibility of the ministerial profession and ultimately of the gospel itself. Prevention of such abuse and appropriate discipline for its occurrence are of paramount importance for the health of the church” (*Agenda for Synod 1992*, p. 352). Synod 2010 approved recommendations from the Abuse Victims Task Force report, which acknowledged that “we have not always dealt well with the consequences of misconduct by church leaders” (*Agenda for Synod 2010*, p. 477). In 2015 an overture came to synod, affirming again that the Christian Reformed Church in North America is not immune from cases of sexual misconduct perpetrated by church leaders—and revisions were requested to strengthen Church Order in addressing the issue. This toolkit highlights many of the themes addressed in the 2016 report to synod in response to that overture. It is our hope that this toolkit will serve as a place to begin to answer the immediate questions that arise when an allegation or a disclosure of abuse occurs. The full [Safe Church report to Synod 2016](#) can be found in the *Acts of Synod 2016* (pp. 699-717). In addition, [Synod 2018](#) addressed an overture regarding abuse of power in the CRC. A task force was formed and reported to [Synod 2019](#) with a series of recommendations related to abuse of power, all of which were adopted.

In the CRC we like to do things “in a fitting and orderly way” (1 Cor. 14:40)—that’s a good thing. At times this tendency causes us to focus so exclusively on the process that we neglect people who are hurting, those who most need the care of the church. In any response to abuse, we must maintain a proper and primary focus on the needs of those who have been harmed. As a church, we tend to be much better at applying the gospel to sin, with the hope of forgiveness—than to suffering, with the hope of God’s very presence. Within our church communities we need to learn and to practice lament, grieving losses and entering into one another’s pain. The good news of the gospel must be good for those who have sinned, as well as for those who are suffering as a result of sin that is not their own. This concept is a foundational component of an excellent, multidisciplinary resource created in 2019 and called *Becoming a Church That Cares Well for the Abused*. Read the article [Caring Well](#) to find out more about this free downloadable resource. (Note: We prefer [person-first language](#), using terminology such as “people who have experienced abuse” rather than “the abused.”)



We believe that opportunities for fruitful ministry abound with persons who have experienced abuse. That does not negate the needs of those who perpetrate abuse and those who may struggle to stop abusive actions or sexually harmful habits. Resources are available! [One resource, by CRC pastor Jay Stringer](#), has proven especially helpful to many who struggle with various kinds of sexual brokenness.

Important note: *If you are using a printed version of this resource, please note that text in color within a paragraph represents an online link that is available in the online version of this resource at network.crcna.org/safe-church/guidelines-handling-abuse-allegations-against-church-leader.*


Why now?

Our context is changing. Experiences of sexual abuse and harassment perpetrated by people in positions of power are now being more openly shared. Time magazine named “[The Silence Breakers](#)” as the 2017 people of the year for sharing their stories of sexual abuse and harassment by people in power. There is a new willingness to take allegations seriously. We expect this trend to continue. Prominent public examples in the entertainment industry, educational institutions, government, and the church have brought this discussion out into the mainstream. How are we to respond? This toolkit walks through steps to follow and presents resources to assist when a disclosure or allegation of abuse occurs.

Sexual abuse and power dynamics

Abuse, any kind of abuse—sexual, emotional, or physical—includes a misuse or abuse of power in a relationship. This power dynamic must be understood in order to respond appropriately when abuse occurs. When a church leader is involved, due to the positional power of the church leader

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role, any sexual misconduct is by its very nature an abuse of office, position, and authority. Synod 2016 adopted a new supplement to Church Order Article 83, stating, “One of the key dynamics in considering abuse of office is the imbalance and misuse of power. The power inherent in the role of officebearer represents a sacred trust and must not be misused” (*Acts of Synod 2016*, p. 865).

Legal definitions for abuse vary from state to state and province to province. The term *misconduct* is used to refer to behaviors that may or may not fall under legal definitions for abuse. “Sexual misconduct should never be viewed as a lesser offense than sexual abuse. Rather, sexual misconduct is broader than sexual abuse, so sexual abuse is a subset of sexual misconduct” (*Acts of Synod 2016*, p. 702). Such actions are unbecoming and ungodly and cause harm to individuals and to the church community, so this broader context must be addressed.

It’s also important to note that it is appropriate to deal with illegal actions through the legal or criminal justice system. Romans 13 tells us that God has established authorities, and we are to be subject to them. This does not preclude or negate the spiritual dimension of sin and consequences, grace and forgiveness. When actions by an individual or an entity are illegal, it’s appropriate that these actions be dealt with by the criminal justice system, as we also take appropriate actions in our ecclesiastical (church) system. While the church’s primary concern is spiritual, that doesn’t mean we ignore what is illegal. It’s possible to work together in both these realms toward the best possible outcome.

A Note about Forgiveness

Forgiveness is crucial to our faith and our relationships with God and others. It makes sense that we want to see forgiveness happen in situations of harm. Yet in situations of sexual abuse, the wounds are deep and complex; forgiveness in these situations doesn’t come easily. Authentic forgiveness requires time to process the experience, to fully understand and acknowledge the harm that’s been done. Pressing for forgiveness too soon can add a burden too heavy to bear for the one who has already experienced unspeakable harm. Instead, we need to hold sacred the wounded person’s need for space, supporting, affirming, and walking alongside without demands or judgment. This provides the best context for the Lord’s transforming power to work, letting the one who



has been harmed determine the time frame and process for each healing step. For additional resources about this important topic as it relates to abuse and deep harm, please see our [Responding to Abuse Toolkit: Forgiveness](#) on The Network.

Responding to an allegation or disclosure of abuse

Listen! Listen! Listen!

The first and most important step is to listen! Carefully, and without judgment, listen to any disclosure or allegation of abuse, as difficult as it may be to hear, or as unbelievable or shocking as it may seem. Our own questions, fears, and misgivings must be put aside for a moment to create the space needed to truly listen. Understand that disclosure is often extremely difficult and that our response upon hearing it has significant impact. To be heard is one of the greatest needs of someone who has suffered abuse. So, ***by simply listening, we are already offering something more valuable than we might imagine.*** Never underestimate the power of a compassionate listening ear. Be empathetic and try to remain calm, using a matter-of-fact tone.

Pause and pray

Take a deep breath; avoid a fast, easy, or flippant answer. Abuse situations can be very complicated. Remember that you are only hearing one perspective. ***PRAY!*** God knows more than we do, and God desires to give us wisdom. Acknowledge God's presence in the conversation, whether you pray aloud with the person disclosing an allegation of abuse or pray silently in your own heart. Remember that you represent the Lord and his great love to the person who has been victimized, who may be questioning God's love and care as a result of their experience.

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If a minor is involved . . .

- 1. Contact the appropriate authorities.** If there is a question about whether or not the offense is reportable, it's still a good idea to contact the appropriate authorities. Tell them what was seen or heard that makes you suspect abuse or neglect and ask them, "Is this something I need to report?" If so, then go ahead with identifying information and make the report. If not, they will let you know, and you can rest assured that you have done your part. A report may be made anonymously. Failure to report can lead to criminal liability, so, ***when in doubt, report immediately.*** Do not investigate! Leave any investigation to specially trained experts. Asking leading questions, or investigating on our own may compromise a criminal or legal process. It's worth repeating—leave the investigating to trained experts! Our first priority must be to prevent future harm. Reporting may be the best way to prevent harm and to begin helpful intervention. It's the responsibility of adults to protect children; therefore, child abuse must always be reported immediately to the appropriate authorities.
- 2. Affirm the child.** If we hear a disclosure directly from a child, we must affirm that he or she is doing the right thing in telling us. Safe Church offers a helpful guide about [how to respond to a child who discloses abuse](#); the guide also lists some of the signs and symptoms of abuse to notice.
- 3. Know whom to contact in your church.** If your church has an abuse response policy, make sure that you know what it says, and follow it. Many church policies include contacting an abuse response team or safe church representative. A response team may include safe church team members, council members, and/or mature adults who are especially gifted or experienced. A small response team (3-4 people) maintains a good level of confidentiality and accountability while also allowing for discussion involving various perspectives in finding the best path forward as the situation unfolds. Safe Church can help find [who to contact in your classis](#).




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4. **Support those involved.** The role of the church is to provide pastoral care to all who are directly involved in the situation. Confidentiality is especially important when a minor is involved, and there may be important reasons not to talk at all about the situation during an investigation. However, the situation may be too heavy for family members and those directly involved to carry alone. A safe church team member can act with extreme confidentiality in a walk-alongside role to support those who are hurting. Community resources may be available to offer various kinds of support as well.
5. **Learn more.** [Additional resources regarding child sexual abuse](#) are available from Safe Church Ministry.

If a church leader is involved . . .

1. **Take a step back, and a deep breath.** It can be deeply upsetting and seem unbelievable to hear allegations of abuse against a church leader, especially if it is someone who is known and trusted. Don't forget to listen carefully to the person disclosing the situation; this shows concern and lets them know that they are being taken seriously. Listen completely before making any judgment. (See "Listen! Listen! Listen!" above.)
2. **Affirm the one coming forward with an allegation.** Thank them for their courage in sharing their story. Don't promise the world or offer false hope; do let them know that you care about them. Do let them know that God sees and knows all things and that God loves them and does not want them to suffer abuse. ***Ask them what they want to have happen.*** Take cues from them and let them take the lead (even if you think you know the best way to proceed). This will help them to feel empowered again, acting on their own behalf, after the extreme powerlessness they have experienced in the situation of abuse. When a child is involved, we must speak and act on the child's behalf. When adults come forward, it's important that they are given space to speak and act on their own behalf.
3. **Know whom to contact in your church.** See #3 above. Connecting with a safe church leader can be especially helpful. The safe church leader will be able to offer a valuable perspective, confidential consultation, and an understanding of the [Advisory Panel Process](#) (APP) approved by synod for use in situations of alleged abuse against a church leader. A handy [flow chart summarizing the APP process](#) may be useful.




4. **Enlist advocates as needed.** Persons who have been directly involved in the situation benefit greatly from having an advocate, someone to offer personal and confidential support in a walk-alongside role. An advocate can act on behalf of someone and can also refer and point to resources. ***Council members, as decision makers, should not act in an advocate role to any one party.*** Rather, council members must maintain a healthy distance from the situation so as to have an uncompromised perspective, serving the entire church. It's important for those tasked with making decisions to see the various factors that are involved and not get connected too tightly to any one narrative, which gives an incomplete picture. Though difficult, it's important that the council make every effort to hear all of the voices and to see the entire situation as clearly as possible. It is also important for each person directly involved to feel supported by someone who is "on their side." That is the critical role of an advocate. Safe Church may be contacted to help find an advocate for persons who have experienced abuse, someone who understands the dynamics and issues involved and can discuss options as the situation unfolds.

5. **Connect with others.** If an ordained church leader is involved, certain provisions in Church Order may apply, particularly Articles 82-84 regarding the Admonition and Discipline of Officebearers. Article 82 states that all officebearers are subject to special discipline, which consists of suspension and deposition of office. Article 83 notes that special discipline shall be applied when officebearers are guilty of neglect or abuse of office, which we've noted is the case in situations of sexual misconduct. For more information, see [Responding to Abuse Toolkit: Denominational Position Statement and Summary of Church Order Related to Abuse](#) on The Network.

Pastor Church Resources often works together with Safe Church to help navigate situations that involve ordained leaders. Please don't hesitate to reach out for assistance.

6. **Consider outside community resources** that could be of help. These may include counseling and crisis centers, domestic violence shelters, the criminal justice system, or legal representation. Local Safe Church Coordinators and team leaders may be called on to help identify and access these community resources. The expertise gained from working with outside resources can lead to more holistic healing and better



outcomes. The role of the church is not diminished by reaching outside the church for assistance. The church, as a spiritual community, has something unique to offer, which is greatly needed over the long-term journey toward restoration and healing.

Additional steps (apply to both contexts above)


1. **Take steps to minimize future harm.** The accused person should immediately take a leave of absence from all leadership positions within the church as a precautionary measure until the case is resolved. This does not imply guilt but shows that the matter is taken seriously. Pastoral care for the one who has been accused must also be offered during this time.
2. **Carefully consider communication.** Note the following helpful tips.
 - Who needs to know what and when? These questions are not easy to answer. Only public information should be shared publicly, yet confidentiality always creates tension within a community. Communication must be carefully navigated and take into account various factors. For example, consider the following:
 - How can we prevent future harm?
 - What are the legal risks involved in publicly disclosing a situation? What are the legal risks of not disclosing?
 - Whom might be hurt, and in what way, if information becomes known? A healthy level of disclosure helps the church community move forward in a positive way. A carefully prepared statement is often best, one that affirms that the church is aware of the situation and is cooperating fully with any investigation.
 - It is much easier to navigate such difficult questions when a response team is already in place and is used to working together. In the middle of the situation is not the time to begin seeking members for a response team.



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- Request that the congregation refrain from unhelpful speculation until the situation has been resolved, and instead pray for the church and for those involved.
- Appoint a point person for any public/media communication. Make sure that everyone in the church knows that if contacted with questions, they are to refer to the point person. (This can prevent a media crisis involving different people saying different things related to the situation, and can minimize the potential for misinformation.)

3. **Due diligence.** Unfortunately, what is disclosed is often only the tip of the iceberg. We must acknowledge that there may be others who have been victimized by the person who was accused. In addition, there are most likely others in the congregation who have experienced abuse, and this situation may become a trigger for them, bringing to the surface intense feelings that have been long buried. Consider how to offer an opportunity for those who have been affected in some way by the disclosure to come forward, or to speak with designated individuals if they have concerns or need to talk with someone. This may also be a time to share counseling or mental-health resources.
4. **Provide pastoral care to all involved.** No one is outside of the grace and love of our Lord, no matter what they have done. Every wrong includes sin as well as the suffering that results as a consequence of sin. Though it seems easier for the church to focus on sin rather than on suffering, our theology must embrace both. We must create space not only for repentance and forgiveness for those who sin, but also for lament and healing for those who suffer as a result. Those who have perpetrated abuse as well as those who have been victimized by abuse need to walk their own difficult journeys of healing and will need the church to support them. Research tells us that long-term professional and specialized group work is often a more effective intervention than individual counseling for persons who perpetrate abuse.
5. **Recognize and respond to secondary trauma.** Secondary or vicarious trauma, also known as compassion fatigue, can happen when engaging with people who have been traumatized. The effects can be serious, and they may be similar to those resulting from direct trauma. Responding to an allegation of abuse against a church leader is a long and difficult process and can be very draining. There are no shortcuts. It can be difficult to wait as the situation unfolds. Most of us would much prefer a

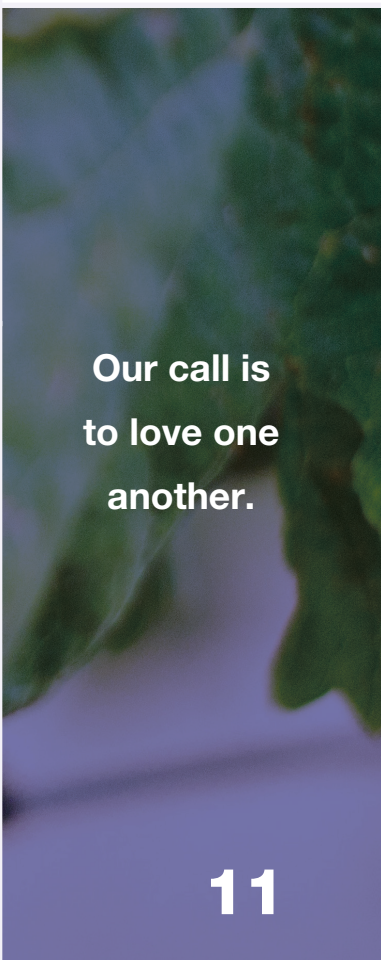


quick fix, but the process must not be rushed. Council members and others involved will feel overwhelmed at times. Good self-care and a healthy support system are essential!

6. **Learn more.** Take advantage of additional Safe Church [resources about church leader misconduct](#), including webinars, articles, inserts, and helpful websites.

Creating a healthy context

1. **Never forget that the church represents Jesus Christ.** The church is called to reflect our Lord Jesus and to be an instrument of his love, justice, and mercy in a world that needs him so much. Together we are his body. Whether abuse has involved a child or a church leader (or both), whether it happened in the church or outside of the church, our call is to love one another, including those who have suffered abuse and those who have perpetrated abuse. There is opportunity here for fruitful ministry—as difficult and painful as the process might be. There is hope for healing with the Lord and with his people.
2. **Partner together to make a safer church.** Jesus did not send disciples out all alone, but two by two. We work best with support and encouragement, sharing our unique gifts with one another and working together toward common goals. Find out more about establishing a safe church team in your [congregation](#) or [classis](#) so that no one feels alone in this work. Contact Safe Church for assistance.
3. **Make a commitment to safe church ministry.** Join in the mission to build communities where the value of each person is respected and protected, where people are free to worship and grow free from abuse, and where the response to abuse is compassion and justice, which foster healing.



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4. **Invest in the next generation.** How are we engaging children and youth in preventing abuse and building respectful relationships and a better future? *Safe Church* recommends the [Circle of Grace program](#), which equips children and youth to participate in building a safer environment for themselves and others.
5. **Keep learning to be better prepared.** Our efforts at prevention and response improve with knowledge. Seek understanding through available resources. Read books, articles, and testimonies. Talk with others who are also dedicated to making churches and communities safer. Explore the links in the online version of this toolkit. (See note at the end of the opening section in this resource.)

Don't stop now!

Our prayer is that this toolkit will be used to make our congregations and communities safer places for everyone, and that the transforming, healing power of God's love may be revealed within and through the church.

The following titles on The Network are designed for learning more:

- Responding to Abuse Toolkit Step #1: [Be Prepared](#)
- Responding to Abuse Toolkit Step #2: [Understanding the Power Dynamic](#)
- Responding to Abuse Toolkit Step #3: [Meeting Immediate Needs](#)
- Responding to Abuse Toolkit Step #4: [What Are the Options?](#)



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