

Responding to Abuse

A Toolkit for Churches

First 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). In 2010 synod 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 is not immune from cases of sexual misconduct perpetrated by church leaders—and revisions were requested to strengthen Church Order in addressing it. 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 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).

Why now?

Experiences of sexual abuse and harassment perpetrated by people in positions of power are now being more openly shared. “*The Silence Breakers*” were named by *Time* magazine as the 2017 people of the year. There is a new willingness to respond to allegations made in the entertainment industry, in educational institutions, and in the halls of government. What about in the church? How are we responding? This toolkit will walk you through steps and resources to assist you when a disclosure or allegation of abuse occurs.



A note about abuse

Abuse, any kind of abuse—sexual, emotional, or physical—includes a misuse or abuse of power in a relationship. When a church leader is involved, due to the power differential in the ministry relationship, 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 from province to province. The term *misconduct* may be 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 behaviors are unbecoming, ungodly, and can cause harm to individuals and to the church community; this broader context must be addressed.

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Responding to an Allegation or Disclosure of Abuse:

Listen! Listen! Listen!

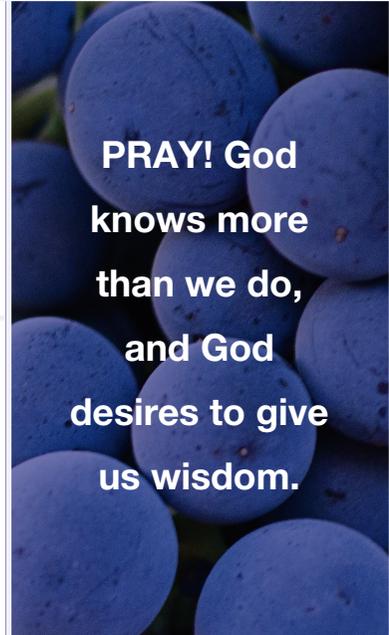
Carefully, and without judgment, listen to any disclosure or allegation of abuse. To be heard is one of the greatest needs of someone who has suffered abuse. So, **by simply listening, you are already offering something more valuable than you might imagine.** Be empathetic; try to remain calm and assuring, using a matter-of-fact tone (even if what you hear seems shocking to you).

Pause and pray

Take a deep breath; avoid a fast, easy, or flippant answer. These 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. Whether you pray aloud with the person disclosing an allegation of abuse or you pray quietly in your heart, acknowledge God's presence with you.

If a minor is involved . . .

- 1. Determine whether this is a reportable offense.** Consider contacting the appropriate authorities. You may tell them what you saw or heard that makes you suspect neglect or abuse and ask them, "Is this something I need to report?" If so, then go ahead with identifying information and make the report. You may make a report anonymously. Failure to report can lead to criminal liability, so, **when in doubt, report.** Do not investigate! Leave any investigation to specially 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.
- 2. Affirm the child.** If you are hearing a disclosure directly from a child, you will want to affirm that they are doing the right thing in telling you what has happened. Safe





Church offers a helpful guide about *how to respond* to a child who discloses abuse; it also includes some of the signs and symptoms of abuse to notice and to watch for.

3. **Know who to contact in your church.** If your church has a 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 while also allowing for discussion involving various perspectives in finding the best path forward as the situation unfolds. Safe church can help *find out who to contact in your classis*.
4. **Support those involved.** The role of the church is to provide pastoral care to all who are directly involved. 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 is usually quite shocking to hear allegations of abuse against a church leader, especially if it is someone you know and trust. Don't forget to listen (see above). Hear the allegation completely before making any judgment.
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. Ask them what they want to have happen, and take your cues from them. This will help them to feel empowered again after the extreme powerlessness they have experienced in the situation of abuse.
3. Know who to contact in your church. See #3 above. Connecting with a safe church team member can be especially helpful; they will be able to offer perspective, consultation, and an understanding of the *Advisory Panel Process* approved by synod for use in situations of alleged abuse against a church leader.

4. Connect with others. If an ordained church leader is involved, certain provisions in Church Order may apply. Pastor Church Resources often works together with Safe Church in navigating situations that involve ordained leaders. In addition, consider community resources that can be of help, counseling and crisis centers, domestic violence shelters, legal aid, etc.
5. Enlist advocates if needed. Those who have been affected by the situation may benefit 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 in the situation; rather, they need to maintain a healthy distance from the situation to maintain perspective. Safe Church may be contacted to help find an advocate who understands the dynamics and issues involved.

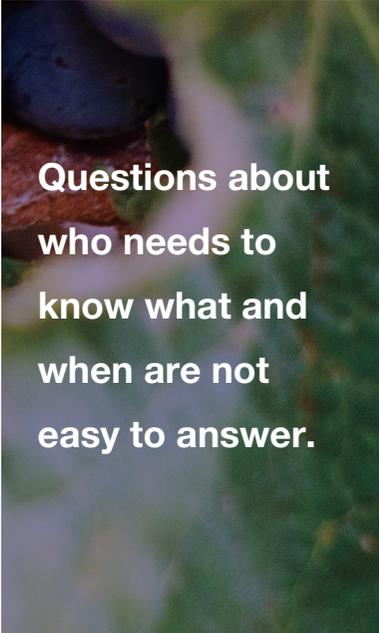
Additional steps (apply to both contexts above)

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.
2. Carefully consider communication. Questions about who needs to know what and when are not easy to answer. Only public information should be shared publicly. Confidentiality always creates tension within a community. It must be carefully navigated considering various factors such as: What are the legal risks involved in disclosure? Who may be hurt, and in what way, if information becomes known? How can we best prevent future harm? 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 may also be helpful to request that the congregation refrain from unhelpful speculation until the situation has been resolved, and instead pray for the church and those involved.
3. Due diligence. Unfortunately, what is disclosed is often only the tip of the iceberg. We must not assume that no one else has been victimized. In addition, there are most likely others in the congregation who have experienced abuse, and this

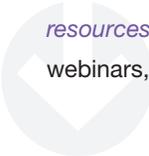


situation may be a trigger for them. Consider how to offer an opportunity for others to come forward, or to speak with designated individuals if they have concerns or need to talk with someone.

4. Provide pastoral care to those who have perpetrated abuse. No one is outside of the grace and love of our Lord, no matter what they have done. Those who have perpetrated abuse need to walk their own difficult journey of healing and will need the church to also support them. Research tells us that long term, professional and specialized group work is a more effective intervention than individual counseling.
5. Recognize and respond to secondary 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. Council members and others may feel overwhelmed. Good self-care is essential!
6. Learn more. Take advantage of additional *Safe Church resources* about church leader misconduct, including webinars, articles, inserts, and helpful websites.

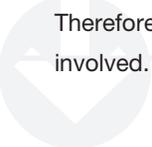


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Creating a healthy context

1. Never forget that the church represents Jesus Christ. The calling of the church is to reflect our Lord Jesus and to be an instrument of his love, justice, and mercy to a world that needs him so much. Together we are his body. Whether abuse has involved a child or a church leader, 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—and for healing with the Lord and with his people.
2. Gather a group. 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. 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.

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3. Make a commitment. Foster a commitment to safe church ministry at every level of leadership. Join in the mission to build communities in which the value of each person is honored and people are free to worship and grow free from abuse—and where abuse has occurred, the response is compassion and justice that foster healing.
 4. Be prepared. Our efforts at prevention and response are better with knowledge. Therefore it is good to make use of available resources to understand the issues involved.

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.

Additional information is available on *The Network*. An electronic copy of this with clickable links is available at crcna.org/safechurch/respondingtoabusetoolkit.

Search for the following titles to learn 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?**



Christian Reformed Church

**Safe Church
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network.crcna.org/safe-church