

Top 10 Things to Know about Abuse in the Church

There are a number of issues involved in educating your church about preventing abuse, and caring for those in your congregation who have been impacted by past abuse.

We hope that this list will help your church as you serve your congregation.

1 Why is this issue important?

The problem of sexual abuse is growing, and many churches are not prepared. We want to serve the needs in our congregation, and yet victims of abuse often feel isolated. Many times they are unsure who to talk to. In some cases their disclosure of abuse has not been handled well, or even ignored, leaving them to feel more alone.

2 Why aren't background checks enough?

While background checks have become part of the standard of care for organizations, it is not enough to rest on those alone to protect your congregation. Here's why:

- According to RAINN.org, less than 10% of abusers will ever encounter the criminal justice system. Some abusers can have well over 100 victims before they are caught.
- At the same time, 90% of abuse victims know their abuser – whether it is a family member, a family friend, or someone in the church/organization. (CDC)

3 How does abuse happen?

- Abuse happens when we are unaware of or ignore red flag behavior, because we assume:
- everyone in church is a safe person
 - we would know an abuser when we see one

4 Why is education/training important?

It's not enough for churches to design policies, as policies do not make a church safe. Church leaders must be vigilant about the ongoing care of their church family. This means continual education in:

- what grooming behavior looks like, how abusers operate, and what makes a church vulnerable
- best practices for handling disclosures, and appropriate reporting
- updates that may be needed in church policies, practices, and staff/leader/volunteer training
- what community resources are available

“If you think responding to sexual abuse in the church is a distraction from the mission of the church, then you don't understand the mission of the church.”

– Russell Moore, ERLC



5 How widespread is this issue?

The Department of Justice estimates that 1 in 4 women, and 1 in 6 men in the US are sexually assaulted before they turn 18.

Look at your congregation. Statistically that means roughly 25% of the women in your church, and 17% of the men have been victims of sexual abuse.

6 How can it be prevented?

It is important to understand the behavior patterns of someone who is intent on causing harm to a child or a vulnerable adult.

It is important to know the characteristics of people who may be targets of abuse. It is important to know that an offender doesn't just groom a victim. An offender also grooms leaders and gatekeepers in the church to give the impression that they are trustworthy.

7 What resources are available?

Whether you would like leadership training, or don't know where to begin, there are many resources available. Here are a few places to start:

- GRACE: Godly Response to Abuse in the Christian Environment (netgrace.org) GRACE has certification training and other prevention tools
- Caring Well: Caring Well is an initiative of the Ethics & Religious Liberty Commission and the Sexual Abuse Advisory Group of the SBC (Caringwell.com).
- Darkness to Light (d2l.org): Stats, training and resources for individuals and organizations

8 What is the responsibility of church leaders?

Any person who believes that a minor is or has been the victim of abuse must report it to the relevant authorities. Those professionals can then investigate, and determine what steps need to be taken to ensure the safety of victims.

9 Our church hasn't really seen a problem. Can't we wait until there's an incident?

This is a serious issue, and we need to be proactive and not wait until there's a crisis. We must learn how to care for those who have experienced abuse. We must also learn how to guard our members from those who wish to cause them harm.

10 Where can I get more info?

There are a number of places you can begin:

Caring Well (CaringWell.com)

The site has a downloadable pdf copy of "Becoming A Church That Cares Well for the Abused." If you would like additional physical copies, contact the AZSBC office.

Arizona Southern Baptist Convention has a Caring Well team, and they are available to answer questions.

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