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RESPONDING TO AN ALLEGATION OF CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE

*A Whitepaper on Biblical Peacemaking Principles
from Alliance Peacemaking*

By Gary D. Friesen



Responding to an Allegation of Child Sexual Abuse

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You just heard from a shocked and angry parent that his six-year-old daughter reported being “touched” by a church youth worker. The little girl said it happened more than once.

The decisions you make now will impact the future of your church. Will your response to these accusations point to God’s compassion and redemption? Or will the peace, growth, and good reputation your church has experienced be a thing of the past?

Responding to allegations of sexual abuse is a difficult and painful journey. At the same time, there is no greater opportunity to point your members and a watching community to the glorious gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. I have seen churches handle these situations with wisdom and grace; in such cases God’s love becomes evident to everyone.

This paper is designed to give you clear guidance as you begin that journey.

What do I need to understand?

Child sexual abuse is an act of deceit. Child sexual offenders learn to be highly manipulative and deceptive in order to conceal their activities. The abuser has even continued to worship with and be a part of the church family. To cover shame and guilt an abuser will often believe his or her own lies. Even those closest to the abuser may be completely unaware; after all, people do not want to believe that somebody they care for could do something so repugnant.

Child sexual abuse is an act of betrayal. When child abuse occurs in a church, it’s almost always by someone placed in position of trust. Children are being harmed by the very person who should be keeping them safe, in the very place where they should be the safest.

Child sexual abusers very often reoffend. The recidivism rate for people who commit this crime is very high. You must be prepared for the likelihood that what is reported is one of many such offenses.

Allegations of child sexual abuse attract media attention. This issue will be bigger than the four walls of your church. Your church and leadership will be in the spotlight. Your community will be looking for any indication that Christians are not living up to the beliefs and practices they profess.

An accusation of child sexual abuse is not a guilty verdict. You may be tempted to prejudge the situation or show favor to either the alleged victim or the accused. Instead, show godly love to all involved. Reach out to the alleged victim and family with compassion and support. Treat the accused person with dignity and respect.

What do I do first?

1. Take time to pray for the wisdom and grace you will need throughout this process. Pray that no matter what happens, God will bring glory to Himself, the people involved will grow to be more like Christ, the perpetrator and victims will experience the healing of Christ, and that our Father will preserve the reputation of His church.

2. Review your church policies about responding to allegations of child sexual abuse. If your policy is inconsistent with this paper, obtain counsel from your district superintendent, Alliance Peacemaking consultant, or your church's attorney.
3. Contact:
 - Your district superintendent: His counsel will be invaluable, and he will ensure that you comply with any Alliance guidelines.
 - Your church's attorney: Often your district superintendent can recommend an attorney.
 - Alliance Peacemaking: We recommend that you talk to a consultant at Alliance Peacemaking. We are always available to provide experienced and effective guidance.
4. Determine what you really know and make careful notes. Did someone make a passing comment that made you suspicious? Did you hear about the abuse from more than one person? What exactly did you hear? Without contacting the suspect, is there other useful information that you can easily access? There is typically a state sexual offender registry that you can check. Write everything down, including dates, statements, observations, and other specific information.
5. If you learned about the sexual offense from a confession, the following insights will be helpful during and after the conversation with the confessor:
 - a. The position of The Christian and Missionary Alliance is to report suspected child sexual abuse. However, in the case of a confession, it is critical that you consult with your attorney before reporting to a government authority. In some instances the confession of child sexual abuse to a pastor may be considered confidential and may not be reported without the permission of the person making the confession.¹
 - b. During the confession, focus on listening and understanding what the person is saying. Remember that child sexual abuse is a crime of deceit. I've learned that in almost every case more will be revealed over time.
 - c. Do not make any promises to the confessor, except that you will act with godly integrity.
 - d. Remind him or her of the gospel of Jesus Christ.
 - e. Let him know that because of the serious nature of his actions, you will do whatever is necessary to help, including engaging government authorities as appropriate. Encourage the perpetrator to confess the wrong to the appropriate government authority, as was done with you.
 - f. Finally, assure the perpetrator that as a brother in Christ, you will be there to help him or her walk down the difficult path of repentance, confession, and godly accountability.
6. In most cases, you learn of the alleged abuse in ways other than through a confession. When there is no confession, make a report to the appropriate government agency as required or allowed by law. Every state has strict requirements to immediately report suspected child sexual abuse. And most states, if not all, protect you from the potential liability of a false report. *The name and phone number of the appropriate agency can be obtained from your attorney or district superintendent.* And remember, in the case of a confession, follow the counsel in section 5 above.

¹ Whether a pastor is a mandatory reporter depends on your state law. These laws often involve a complex inter-relationship between statutes related to pastoral privilege, mandatory reporting, and confidentiality. You can get this information from your attorney. I encourage you to carefully read your state's reporting law, which is available on the internet. The ChildWelfare.gov website has a state statute section, with an easily searchable state-by-state database of clergy reporting laws. An informed leader is a wise leader. With the counsel of your attorney, district superintendent, and Alliance Peacemaking consultant, you will be able to navigate through the reporting process.

7. Remove the accused from any position in the church where he or she may have access to children.
8. Schedule a meeting for your leadership team. At the meeting you will want to go through the following:
 - a. Pray!
 - b. Remind your team that God is completely in control and has an infinite love for His people and His church. He will keep His promises, and He will be with you at every step of the process.
 - c. Bring the team up to date on what you've learned. Remind them to keep the information in strict confidence.
 - d. Agree on a preliminary plan for how the church will minister to the alleged victim, the accused, and their families. The church has a critical ministry role to everyone involved. Assign specific people or families to this task with the purpose of focusing on their care, not being an advocate for their position. Showing care and concern will help prevent further harm. Make church resources available as needed, including counseling, finances and other practical support.
 - e. Select a spokesperson for the church and help this person prepare to meet with the media and the congregation as appropriate. Any communication by the spokesperson should be discreet, truthful and diplomatic. All inquiries, whether from within or outside your church, should be directed to this person, and no one else should respond separately.
 - f. Prepare talking points for a public statement. You can contact Alliance Peacemaking for helpful language.
 - g. Determine how and when information will need to be communicated to your congregation. The timing and content will vary widely depending on the circumstances. Your district superintendent, Alliance Peacemaking consultant, and attorney can help you with these decisions. A good rule of thumb is that you will want to inform your church members before they read about it in the newspaper.
9. Notify your church's insurance agent.

What do I avoid?

1. Do not attempt to conduct a detailed investigation into the allegations. The state child services agency and police have investigators who are specially trained to interview children. Your church should work closely with the investigative authorities to determine what happened and to minister to all those who are impacted by the events.
2. Do not deny, minimize, or blame. In my experience these responses are all unhelpful and will only make matters worse. Using discretion and care, deal with the situation honestly; view it as an opportunity for your church members to grow in the ability to serve each other and the surrounding community.

What other steps does our church need to take?

1. Designate a team to comprehensively review your church policies and guidelines related to the prevention of child sexual abuse. Make any necessary improvements. Your church's policies should include sections on screening youth workers, recognizing and reporting suspected abuse, and guidelines for ministry activities. In today's cultural environment, the church must be a place that sets the standard for child care and safety. *Every church* must have a comprehensive policy to reduce the risk of child sexual abuse.

I have found the following two resources to be exceptionally helpful:

- *Safe Place: Guidelines for Creating an Abuse-Free Environment in Local Church Ministries*, Wingspread Publishers.
- *Reducing the Risk: Keeping Your Ministry Safe From Child Sex Abuse*, www.churchlawandtax.com

2. Consider whether it would be helpful to bring in a neutral facilitator who is skilled and experienced in Christ-centered conciliation. I have seen that relationships in churches are often damaged or even broken as a result of this type of sin.² For example, there can be hurt and misunderstanding between the victim's parents and church leadership. Bringing in a compassionate and gifted facilitator can help bring healing to relationships. Contact Alliance Peacemaking for help in addressing these needs.

Leading your church in responding to an allegation of child sexual abuse will be one of the most challenging experiences you will ever face. And in this trial, you will encounter God's grace and power in ways that you couldn't have imagined.

I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the Lord's holy people, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge—that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God (Eph. 3:17b-19).

Very few church leaders are experts in responding to allegations of child sexual abuse. The spiritual, practical, and legal implications can feel overwhelming.

You will need counsel from an experienced local attorney.

Alliance Peacemaking is always available to provide experienced biblical counsel. We can work with your leaders and your district superintendent to provide a redemptive path forward.

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² Facilitating any type of personal contact between a child victim and perpetrator should not be considered by the church. Because of the nature of this sin, the manipulative nature of the relationship, and the inherent power imbalance, any type of contact is risky, and would almost certainly create more harm than good.