

## 7 Ways to Welcome Abuse Survivors in Our Churches

ARTICLES · RESPONDING WELL, PREVENTION

By Boz Tchividjian



Churches should be some of the safest and most welcoming communities for those who have suffered from sexual abuse. Sadly, today these are some of the places survivors feel most vulnerable as they are often shamed, silenced, and judged.

This is most tragically illustrated by the case of a young girl who was sexually abused by a missionary doctor on the mission field. When she finally stepped forward and reported the abuse, the missionary leaders made this little 13-year-old girl sign a “confession” [letter](#) in which she had to acknowledge having “participated in a physical relationship” with the offender and end the letter with “...I know what I did was very wrong, and I am very sorry for it.” Years later this survivor told me that this damning [letter](#) is what shamed her into decades of feeling worthless and being silent. It doesn't take a demand to sign a confession for a church to become an unsafe and unwelcoming place for survivors. Hurtful comments, the embracing of alleged perpetrators, the failure to offer assistance, and the pretending that this offense doesn't exist in the Christian community are just a handful of ways that further wound survivors and drive them out of the very places that should be their refuge.

I want to share seven ways that I believe will help transform our churches into some of the safest and most welcoming communities for survivors of abuse.

**Be a friend and listen:** One of the best ways to serve survivors is to simply be their friend and listen. This does NOT mean we pity them and turn them into our special project. It means that we spend time with them, laugh with them, cry with them, and support them. It means that we validate them as human beings made in the image of God. It means that we don't have all the answers, and it's ok. Too many survivors have been traumatized by churches that fail to protect them, and then turn around and ignore them or tell them what to do. Perhaps we can help these amazing survivors shed the shame by being a safe person in a safe place.

**Know the available resources:** Survivors often need professional assistance to help shed the shame fueled by abuse. Becoming familiar with local resources such as qualified therapists, victims' advocates, attorneys, and support groups will enable us to introduce them to our church communities and to any survivor who may need their services.

**Acknowledge & address spiritual struggles:** Those who have been sexually abused often struggle with many spiritual doubts, concerns, and questions. Criticizing or judging these struggles will only fuel more shame as survivors are pushed away from yet another unsafe place. On the other hand, offering no response or simply providing oversimplified answers can minimize the importance of these struggles in the lives of these individuals. Sometimes we answer best by simply connecting individuals with sound spiritual resources that may provide them a starting point to address their particular spiritual struggles. This can be anything from recommending a book, blog, or podcast to encouraging them to become part of an abuse-survivor support group at the church. It could also mean connecting them with a clergy member or other professional who has worked through many of these spiritual issues. Before recommending any particular spiritual resource, it is critical that we seek the counsel of Christian child-protection experts and other Christians who have the training for and experience with serving survivors. Organizations such as [GRACE](#) and [Together-We-Heal](#) are equipped to provide such assistance.

**Connect with local law enforcement:** Developing a relationship between our faith communities and local law enforcement is invaluable. Believe it or not, most law enforcement officers are thrilled when people in the community seek them out for advice and help. Our churches would greatly benefit from the guidance provided by law enforcement on issues such as child protection, dealing with known sex offenders, status of pending cases, and available community resources for survivors. In most cases, this is as easy as calling the local law enforcement office and scheduling an appointment with the officer who supervises the investigation of abuse cases. Simply let him/her know that your church is seeking guidance on issues related to abuse. I highly recommend having a member of the church leadership be a part of this meeting. Connecting with law enforcement will communicate a strong message to the survivors in our churches that we take this issue seriously as we seek to love and protect them with excellence.

**Start an abuse-survivor support group:** Support groups often create safe places within our churches for survivors to be honest and vulnerable as they continue to walk the long and difficult road of healing. Giving survivors a safe place to speak freely about their abuse and struggles can offer real healing from the isolation they have experienced. When survivors know they are not alone, they can encourage one another by walking through the often difficult journey together. Though one doesn't have to be a survivor to start such a group, I highly recommend that we seek out the invaluable input and assistance of survivors when putting together such a group. Developing and supporting this group is a powerful way a church can communicate that it values, protects, and cares for those suffering in its midst.

**Develop response protocols:** Work with the church leadership and outside child-advocate experts to develop a protocol for responding to abuse disclosures. How we respond to abuse disclosures is perhaps the single most important way we demonstrate value to those who have been abused. A protocol that follows the law and places the needs of the survivor first is needed in every church. I will be writing more about this in future posts.

**Speak Up:** We serve survivors best when we are their biggest advocates. Those who have been abused should find their greatest and most vocal supporters inside the church. Shaming, silencing, and judging have no home in a community that loves and advocates on behalf of abuse victims. Unfortunately, there are still many within the walls of the church that don't see it that way. That is where we step in and speak up. We speak up for these amazing survivors, constantly encouraging them with our words and actions to hold their heads up high and walk away from shame and silence. We speak up because it is these unsung heroes who so often teach us, inspire us, and reflect Jesus. We speak up because Jesus speaks up for all of us. We speak up because it is our privilege.

Transforming our churches and faith communities into places of refuge for those who have been violated, judged, and marginalized is what the Gospel is all about. If God is our refuge, then our churches must be the places where these precious souls find safety and rest.

Let's begin this transformation today.

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