



UPDATE FROM THE GENERAL SUPERINTENDENT

When Abuse Comes to the Church

Many church members and visitors have experienced some form of physical or sexual abuse in childhood or in relationships. How can we help them?

First and foremost, preaching, teaching, and prayer in the power of the Spirit will bring healing, deliverance, and transformation. In addition, victims need support and guidance to develop healthy communication and relationship skills. For many, it's helpful to refer them to a trusted licensed professional for counseling. The UPCI has an endorsed ministry, Points of Refuge (pointsofrefuge.com), that provides confidential, spiritual counseling to ministers and their families. Another UPCI-endorsed organization is the Center for Apostolic Counseling (apostoliccounseling.org), a network of professional Apostolic counselors. A helpful resource for many situations is *Lifeline: A Pastor's Resource for Families in Crisis*, available from pentecostal-publishing.com. Produced by the Family Ministries of the UPCI, it consists of two volumes of lessons with references.

Our Responsibility

How should leaders respond if there's an allegation of abuse within the church? Even a false allegation, if not properly handled, can be devastating. For preliminary information and guidance, see the official Position Paper titled "Abuse and Sexual Misconduct" on upci.org and in the *UPCI Manual* (available on upciministers.com).

The following discussion focuses on child abuse, but most principles also apply to adult sexual misconduct involving a leader. If a person in authority commits a sexual offense with someone in the church, there are two distinct issues. First, there is the moral sin. Second, there is the abuse of authority and power, which indicates a serious character flaw. In addition to sexual sin, the leader has taken advantage of someone under his or her spiritual care. In many ways, a spiritual leader represents God, and because of this spiritual role, an inappropriate relationship with a parishioner can cause great damage. This breach of trust raises both ethical and legal concerns and disqualifies the person from leadership.

In every case, our most important goal is to protect people and especially children. To do so, we must create a

culture of protection. As Apostolics, we rightly believe in spiritual authority and in pastoral authority. Unfortunately, some leaders manipulate the teaching of respect and submission in order to mistreat people. Thus, when we teach and preach on authority, we should explain that no authority is absolute except God's; all human authority is limited and must be accountable to other leaders. Christians should never follow a leader into false doctrine, sin, or unethical behavior. By teaching and example, we should communicate the proper exercise of authority, accountability for leadership, and guidelines for personal interactions including pastoral counseling. (See my book *Spiritual Leadership in the Twenty-First Century*.)

Our second goal is to protect the church. To do so, we must adopt appropriate policies and procedures to prevent abuse and to handle reports of abuse. By following them, we also protect against false allegations and legal liability. We can't cover up wrongdoing to protect leaders. Doing so is ethically wrong and ultimately results in great harm to the church.

Policies and Procedures

It's important to know the law in our jurisdiction and to consult an attorney as needed. In most jurisdictions, the law requires ministers, teachers, counselors, or people in general to report a reasonable suspicion of child abuse. Although most jurisdictions recognize clergy confidentiality, it generally doesn't cover child abuse. Even more important than a legal obligation, we have an ethical obligation to protect the vulnerable. Abusers must be denied access to present or future victims. Research and experience show that abusers are highly likely to abuse again. Expressions of repentance alone, no matter how sincere, won't prevent abuse unless there are clear restrictions, strong accountability, and targeted counseling. For this reason, it is important to report abuse as required by law and ethics.

It's also important to train leaders and workers. A special committee of the UPCI has been working for the past two years to develop sample policies and training tools for local churches. These resources are available for free under the ministry name SafeChurch with documents and digital books at upciministers.com. Training videos are hosted

on MinistryCentral.com, with more videos to be released in coming months. Insurance companies have resources as well, especially those who specialize in churches.

At minimum, every church should screen those who work with minors (children and youth). Employees and volunteers should complete an application form with references and employment history. The church should check references, including previous churches.

A simple but helpful policy is the two-adult rule. It mandates that two adults should always be present when working with minors: in the classroom, taking children to the restroom, and on trips. This policy protects children, and it also protects workers against false allegations.

If any injury takes place while a child is under the church's care, it should be documented and reported to the parents. Any serious issue should be reported to the church's insurance company, which can provide legal advice.

Churches need clear procedures for reporting problems such as allegations or injuries and should always follow those procedures. When evidence or suspicion of abuse arises, the ministry team member in the situation should report it to his or her immediate supervisor and to the pastor. The team member, supervisor, and pastor should call the authorities together, without delay. All details shared by the victim should be documented thoroughly, and the call to report should be documented. Beyond this, only authorized persons should make statements on behalf of the church.

It's important for the church to ensure that its policies are being implemented, by conducting periodic training and by providing oversight. The only thing worse than not having policies is to have policies but not follow them, for then the church acknowledges its responsibility while failing to fulfill it.

We must treat all allegations seriously by following policies fairly and conscientiously. We shouldn't blame or attack the alleged victim. We must remember that minors cannot give legal consent. Even if they apparently cooperated with an abuser, they were likely groomed, manipulated, threatened verbally, or coerced emotionally. Even in the case of adults, abusers typically prey on vulnerable people who have dysfunctional relationships, who have a troubled past, or who are less likely to be believed. Their problems or shortcomings cannot be used to justify a leader who takes advantage of them. Unfortunately, sometimes the first response to an allegation is to ignore, silence, blame, shame, or attack the accuser. While we must presume that an accused is innocent until proven guilty, we also need to take complaints seriously. It's important to remove the accused's access to ministry to minors or other vulnerable persons while the complaint is investigated. Sometimes the allegation is false, in which case the best way to prove it false is to follow policy thoroughly. Often, other accusers come forth to support the credibility of the original complaint.

The church should demonstrate compassion for victims and their families, perhaps by offering professional counseling without admitting any liability. Most of the time, victims don't want to punish the church but want to be heard, believed, valued, and assisted. They also want assurance that the church will do everything it can to prevent someone else from becoming a victim. Fulfilling this purpose helps bring meaning and healing for their own trauma. If the church refuses to hear them, they may resort to the law or to the media.

Forgiveness and Restoration

For offenders, we believe in forgiveness of sin and restoration to salvation. True repentance involves acceptance of sin's consequences both in church and in society. Moreover, abusers of all kinds need specialized counseling and clear lines of accountability. Child abusers need legal accountability.

Perpetrators can't be given access to potential victims in the future. As an analogy, when church treasurers embezzle money, they can be forgiven of their sin, restored to salvation, and restored to some form of church involvement. However, they have forfeited their access to such a position because they have broken trust. We would never appoint them to be a church treasurer again because they've shown susceptibility to this form of temptation and because others wouldn't trust them or the church. Even more so, we can't restore abusive leaders to positions of authority in which they could abuse people again. Doing so can result in great spiritual damage as well as legal liability.

God can help victims to forgive their abusers, but forgiveness doesn't mean covering up sin, nor is it a substitute for justice. Forgiveness doesn't require victims to have an ongoing relationship with their abusers in which they could be hurt again. Forgiveness means letting go of vengeance, putting the situation in the hands of God, and moving forward in faith.

In conclusion, let's create a culture of accountability and protection so that abuse won't occur in church. If abuse does come to church, we should respond in a way that is morally, ethically, and legally correct. Let's prepare ourselves to minister God's grace and healing to everyone in every situation.

Adapted from presentation to ministers at General Conference, October 7, 2021, Indianapolis, Indiana.

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