

Guidelines for Congregations Addressing Child Abuse

Spiritual Impacts of Child Abuse

Many factors – religious background, attitude, gender, and type of abuse – interact complexly with effects of abuse on spirituality, and may result in:

- ✚ Challenging spiritual questions increasing among survivors (i.e., Where was God during my abuse? Am I still a virgin? Have I disappointed God?)
- ✚ Feelings, including guilt, despair, fear, anger and rage, persisting
- ✚ Survivors vacillating between desiring isolation and having suicidal ideations to clinging to relationships and fearing death
- ✚ Survivors' trust in other people and in institutions is annihilated
- ✚ Adults minimizing children's spirituality, in general, and, in particular, among survivors
- ✚ Children's beliefs may be expressed in non-verbal forms and go unrecognized by adults
- ✚ Adults projecting personal beliefs or experiences onto survivors



Significant numbers of survivors change their original spiritual practices by denouncing their traditional religion, changing faiths, or turning to more personal forms of practice

- ✚ Some survivors report becoming repulsed by anything or anyone related to God
- ✚ Survivors report feeling confused about God, believing God is unfair
- ✚ Many survivors' attendance among faith communities decreases
- ✚ Spiritual faithfulness and practice among some survivors often stalls
- ✚ Survivors increasingly reject authority (including parents, teachers, bosses, romantic partners, community leaders, etc.)
- ✚ Survivors seek alternative sources for spiritual questions including destructive relationships, chemical dependencies, and suicide

Survivors report the importance of spirituality in their survival

- ✚ Some survivors continue to pray and report significant personal spiritual experiences
- ✚ Some survivors report making use of their personal faith and traditions to cope
- ✚ Supportive faith communities promote resiliency

Congregational Response to Survivors of Child Abuse and their Families

Preparation

- ✚ Have at least one person on staff dedicated to keeping informed with current trauma treatment, wrestling with theological implications, and communicating well with staff and lay people.
 - ✓ Seek out assistance from qualified experts (including trained therapists, sexual abuse responders, etc.) when needed.
 - ✓ Establish relationships with reputable therapeutic agencies and faith-based resources in your area.
 - ✓ Be informed of current state and county mandatory reporting requirements.
 - ✓ Create internal staff and lay ministry guidelines for effective reporting and meaningful care practices

- ✚ Encourage truth-telling among the congregation.
 - ✓ In worship, among small groups, in children and youth groups, in peer counseling – create spaces where confessions and testimonies can occur, be valued, and be safe, under the supervision of qualified staff person dedicated to keeping informed of current trauma treatment practices.
 - ✓ Create awareness-building opportunities by sharing community resources publicly, steps for reporting abuse effectively, welcoming survivors to share their accounts of healing in small groups or during services, and sponsoring activities or events
 - ✓ Have staff members or lay leaders dedicated to learning about how children express spirituality and preparing age-appropriate opportunities for children’s regular spiritual practice and worship

- ✚ Create ongoing opportunities for safety and healing in your faith community
 - ✓ Encourage staff and lay people to seek ongoing opportunities for healing, growing in healthy relationship with themselves and others
 - ✓ Practice healing rituals in worship, including prayers, sacraments, confession, singing and playing musical instruments, liturgical dance, and other forms of corporate movement
 - ✓ Train lay people in child protection safety and safe peer counseling
 - ✓ Make clear policies that adhere to mandatory reporting guidelines
- ✚ Share useful resources with neighboring congregations

Acknowledging Crisis or Potential Crisis

- ✚ Listen
 - ✓ Hold any suggestion or indication of child abuse as valuable.
 - ✓ Seek outside consultation from qualified experts when any concerns arise
- ✚ If an alleged perpetrator is a staff member or a member of the congregation, cooperate with law enforcement
- ✚ If it becomes clear a staff member has perpetrated abuse, be willing to admit failure as an institution and seek opportunities for healthy change
 - ✓ In order to seek healing, repentance, forgiveness, and restitution, staff must be able to acknowledge where and how the institution failed

- ✚ In cases where staff members or members of the congregation are perpetrators, when communicating with the congregation and community, communicate what is necessary.
 - ✓ Stick to facts. Do not guess, surmise, or hypothesize.
 - ✓ Make sure the congregation knows that the leadership has taken immediate measures to ensure the safety of their children
 - ✓ Discourage any and all rumors, and communicate clear representatives for good communication (i.e., pastoral liaisons, law enforcement officials, qualified counselors)
 - ✓ Be prepared to direct parents of youth who had any contact with alleged perpetrator(s) to law enforcement should they have any concerns, as well as to qualified spiritual directors and mental health professionals trained in

Ongoing Care after Crisis

- ✚ Encourage survivors and their families to receive ongoing support
 - ✓ Encourage meeting with a minister, trained in response to abuse, and personally having worked through challenging spiritual questions related to abuse
 - ✓ Assist in locating and paying for qualified counseling with a mental health professional trained in response to abuse
 - ✓ Ensure that survivors and families feel comfortable and safe in congregational settings
 - ✓ Develop supportive networks within the congregation, especially during ongoing legal processes. Those within these networks must be exhorted to refrain from taking sides, and only to provide spiritual, emotional, and physical encouragement during crisis (which may include bringing meals, providing safe childcare, praying together, providing safe opportunities to express emotion, etc.)

- ✓ Do not have a spiritual agenda other than to provide safe, trustworthy care and support
 - Be careful not to communicate discomfort or disdain with a survivor's present religious practices or beliefs
 - Focus on healing from abuse, trust that faithfulness coincides with health
 - Be sensitive to survivors and families' possible anger or disillusionment with faith communities
 - Be kind when encouraging survivors' seeking assistance for spiritual challenges
 - Do not be afraid of saying, "I don't know," to challenging spiritual questions. Survivors highly value authenticity

✚ Be prepared for secondary effects of present crises

- ✓ For example, survivors of past abuse experiencing residual effects

✚ Be patient

- ✓ Survival from abuse is a trek – not something easily gotten over, forgiven, or moved on from – a kind of rebirth into new senses of life and normality, one that takes time, energy, and steady supporters
- ✓ Pace response to spiritual healing similarly to pacing healing from physical and emotional damage
- ✓ Be committed to staying in relationship with survivors, even as you refer to ordained or lay ministers and mental health professionals who have trained in addressing issues related to abuse