

HANDLING ALLEGATIONS OF ABUSE

Developing, updating, and implementing policies to handle a variety of issues, including deterrence strategies and response practices related to physical, psychological, and sexual abuse or harassment, has been an ongoing process among the local churches. Similar efforts are ongoing among those who take the lead in extra-local work among the children, young people, and college age to better protect the minors and young adults among us. Though state laws vary, some basic principles will be outlined here for the benefit of all the saints and especially the leading ones in the churches. Many of these principles apply also to abuse of the elderly or of those with diminished capacity. Keeping these principles is crucial to maintain the testimony of the Lord before men and to care for the saints and their children in all the churches.

All brothers who are involved in the administration of a church and all saints who oversee or are supported by a church to care for its various constituencies should know applicable federal, state, and local laws and guidelines for identifying and reporting abuse or harassment. This includes knowing who is mandated to report to civil authorities such incidents as are brought to their attention and the risks for non-mandated reporters if they should fail to report abuse that they reasonably suspect. It also includes knowing the difference between reporting requirements for incidents that affect minors versus others. In many jurisdictions the critical factor is not the age of the person identified as a victim at the time of disclosure but that person's age at the time of the alleged incident. In other words, if a person was a minor at the time of an alleged incident of abuse, the adult who becomes aware of it may be required to report it to law enforcement professionals and/or child protection agencies, as appropriate. If the person was not a minor at the time of the alleged incident, the responsibility to report generally rests with the alleged victim.

Reporting Incidents

When a report of abuse concerning a minor is received, impartial fact finding may be needed to assess if there is a reasonable suspicion that abuse has occurred. However, care should be exercised not to compromise or bias a potential investigation by civil authorities. This care may include seeking professional guidance or involvement in obtaining information from the parties involved, especially those parties that are minors. If reasonable suspicion is established, the matter should be immediately reported to the appropriate civil authorities. The report should be accompanied by sufficient information to allow those authorities to initiate an investigation.

It is important to inform those who bear responsibility in the church concerning alleged or suspected incidents that happen in the context of the church so that they can ensure that necessary measures are taken to protect any person who may be at risk and can respond appropriately on behalf of the church to outside inquiries. In cooperation with the authorities, the responsible brothers should also examine the circumstances of the alleged abuse with a view to remediation, as appropriate, without interfering with or compromising any investigation by civil authorities. The saints should realize that reporting suspected incidents to the responsible brothers does not discharge their own responsibility to report to the civil authorities incidents in which the alleged victim is a minor.

Saints, especially those who bear responsibility, should not discourage any person from reporting incidents of abuse to civil authorities or health care professionals and should facilitate, as they are able and as the situation merits, the referring of alleged victims or their family members to

professional caregivers. Nor should any saint seek to dissuade others from taking appropriate steps to ensure their own safety and the safety of their children.

Incidents Falling Under the Administration of the Church

Matters that do not involve crimes or in which the alleged victim was not a minor at the time of the purported incident and does not wish to press charges may still require the attention of the leading ones as the representatives of God's government in the church, and such matters should be brought to them (Matt. 18:17). Such matters should be handled according to the proper way to deal with problems in the church. In no case is public and contentious airing of grievances appropriate (1 Cor. 11:16; Titus 3:2).

When a situation is presented to the leading ones or a co-worker, it should be handled cautiously and judiciously without prejudice or partiality (1 Tim. 5:21, see footnotes 2 and 3). The accuser, the accused, and any third party witnesses should be carefully heard in order to ascertain verifiable facts and be fair to all parties (Deut. 19:15; Matt. 18:16; 2 Cor. 13:1). The brothers should listen to the dear saints' concerns and exercise to shepherd them, not according to their own disposition but according to God (1 Pet. 5:2). In cases where restrictions are needed to safeguard others, those restrictions should be committed to writing and a copy given to the person being disciplined to avoid ambiguity or misunderstanding. If a saint subsequently expresses a concern, the responsible brothers should, without divulging confidential details, assure that saint that the matter has been or is being dealt with appropriately. In every case the leading ones' obligation before the Lord is to pray for the saints, to shepherd their souls by ministering life to them, and to seek to restore a proper condition of peace and fellowship with the Lord and with other members of the Body.

The Lord Himself laid out the process by which offenses should be addressed and the spirit in which that process should be carried out (Matt. 18:15-17; Gal. 6:1). If a matter has been referred to the responsible brothers, the saints should not talk about it among themselves lest they sin by damaging others' reputations, compromise the brothers' ability to effectively address the situation, and inflame fleshly reactions among the saints through gossip. Abstaining from such gossip properly limits the circle of people who know about an incident. This will reduce entangling those who are not directly involved and polluting their minds with fears or biases against either the accused or the alleged victim. It will also simplify both resolving incidents and appropriately communicating their resolution. The saints should understand that if the established facts do not conclusively support an accusation, whatever action the responsible brothers might take will necessarily be limited. Furthermore, repeating unverified accusations against others is destructive gossip and can be considered slander that opens the possibility of legal action from the aggrieved party. False accusations can and have occurred. Moreover, unbridled talk can also cause the alleged victim to suffer embarrassment and humiliation, making it difficult for that person to continue in the fellowship of the church. Saints should not assume that they fully understand all aspects of a situation that has been placed in the hands of the responsible brothers.

*"And let the peace of Christ arbitrate in your hearts,
to which also you were called in one Body; and be thankful." (Col. 3:15)*