



ABC's of Church Management Newsletter

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This newsletter has been developed to provide compliance guidelines for local congregations concerning state and federal regulations. It is shared as a basic reference newsletter with the understanding that the publisher is not giving legal, financial, or other professional service/advice. The publisher acknowledges that the laws and regulations of each state may vary. If professional assistance is required, the services of a competent professional should be secured.

Preparing a Strategic Plan for Handling an Allegation of Misconduct

It is sad and disturbing that allegations of misconduct continue to raise their ugly heads in the church. Within the last week two youth pastors were accused of misconduct with their students and one pastor was sentenced for his involvement with foster children. Is your church prepared to handle such a situation? This edition will address the development of a strategic plan.

Who receives the allegation:

Allegations can be made to church staff/leadership or to the district credentials committee. Allegations can be made of misconduct between adults and children/youth or adults with other adults. If the allegation involves adults and children/youth, the one receiving the information of the allegation is responsible to file a report with the proper county child protective services or law enforcement.

What information do I need to report?

Douglas J. Besharow suggests the following information be gathered prior to making a report to police, state police, or child protective services:

- The child's (or children's) name, age, sex, ethnic background, and permanent address.
- The child's (or children's) present condition and the possible need for emergency action.
- The child's (or children's) present location and the location where the incidents occurred, if different from the permanent address.
- The name of the parents or other persons who are responsible for the child's (or children's) care (and address, if different from the permanent address of the child).
- The name and address of the person or persons who are alleged to be responsible for the abuse or neglect.
- The siblings' names, sex, ages, and present location.
- The names, ages, sex, and relation to the child of other adults in the home.
- Any other evidence of the alleged maltreatment.
- The reason or reasons for suspecting abuse or neglect, including the physical or emotional condition of the child (or children) and statements of a child or parent.
- Any other relevant statements made by the parents, the child, or significant others.
- Any available information about previous injuries to the child or siblings (or other evidence of prior maltreatment).
- The names, addresses, and phone numbers of possible witnesses to the alleged maltreatment.
- The reporter's name, telephone number, address, and occupation if the reporter is willing to provide this information.

- Relationship of the reporter to the child and family.
- Any other information that the reporter believes may be helpful.

It may not be possible to get all of the above information. The more you can compile the better. All conversations should be documented. Copies of these conversations should be submitted to the proper authorities.

Does anyone else need to be notified?

If the allegation is made against a staff member and they hold ministerial credentials, the district credentials committee should be notified promptly. The state minister should also be notified. This is not necessary if it is a volunteer, however, it is wise to contact the state minister so that the state is available to help if legal proceedings follow that involve the church.

The church's insurance company should also be notified. In many instances the insurance company will provide an attorney to represent the church.

Document Everything:

Documentation is essential. The initial conversation in which the allegation is revealed should be documented, signed, and dated. If an adult is making the allegation, have them submit a written statement detailing their allegation. If the allegation is being made by a child, document the conversation in verbatim fashion. Any conversations occurring after the initial allegation is made, should be documented, signed, and dated. It can not be over emphasized: document, document, document.

What is our responsibility to the one being accused?

If the misconduct allegation is made against a paid staff member, that person should be placed immediately on administrative leave. This should be with pay until such a time as the allegation can be investigated. If the allegation is made against a volunteer, the volunteer should be relieved of their position until such a time that an adequate investigation can be performed.

If the accused is a member of the pastoral staff, they need to be surrounded by a "circle of safety." If the district credentials committee does not name this "circle of safety," then the church should take responsibility to name individuals to comprise this circle. They should not be people within the church. They can be pastors in the community or neighboring Church of God pastors. The purpose of this "circle of safety" is to provide the accused with emotional and spiritual support as well as hold the accused accountable for actions during and following the investigation process.

What is our responsibility to the victim(s)?

The victim(s) and their family needs to receive emotional and spiritual support. If they attend the church, the pastoral staff should provide this support. If the family is not open to it being the pastoral staff, the church should make arrangements for the family to receive counseling from either other area pastors or a professional counselor. If the victim attends another congregation, the family should be encouraged to seek the emotional and spiritual support of their clergy.

How do we handle the media?

The media will jump on news of abuse in the church. The church should have a preplanned strategy for handling the media. This includes the following:

- Select a spokesperson. It is better if the spokesperson is not the pastor. This should be the chairperson of the corporation or an individual that is

articulate and comfortable in front of cameras.

- A written statement should be prepared. This statement should be brief and honest. This statement should not contain unnecessary details, place blame, interfere with the privacy of either the victim or accused, nor violate any confidentiality concerns. A prepared written statement keeps the spokesperson from adlibbing and possibility making statements that do not accurately represent the stance of the church. It would be helpful to make copies of the statement to be given to media personnel so that the statement can not be misquoted or taken out of context. An example of such a statement could be as follows:

“My name is _____ and I am representing the _____ Church of God. We hold the protection of children and youth in the church with highest regards. We are fully cooperating with all legal and church authorities in the investigation of the allegations. We have implemented emergency plans that have placed the individual involved on administrative leave. Our prayers are with the families of the victim(s) and of the one being investigated.”

How and what do we tell the congregation?

It is essential that the truth be told. Once reporting of allegations is made, all kinds of rumors and stories will start. Educating congregants with the truth does not mean engaging in gossip or speculation. Attorney Joy Thornburg Melton in her book, *Safe Sanctuaries: Risking the Risk of Child Abuse in the Church*, recommends the following:

“At this point, it is important to provide honest and forthright information. This may begin with a letter to the members that briefly explains the incident and the initial action taken by the church. Such a letter should not include the identification of the child victim nor that of the accused abuser. On the other hand, it should include a statement of the actions taken to assure the safety of all the children and to assure your congregation’s continuing ability to provide ministry to children and youth. This letter should dispel rumors and innuendo and assure everyone that everything possible has been done to provide for the safety of the victim(s) and to enable the safe continuation of the church’s ministry.”

A congregational meeting can also help to educate congregants of the situation. It is essential that this meeting be well planned. The proper preparation will keep this meeting from turning into an occasion for anger and confusion. Joy Thornburg Melton recommends:

“Schedule a meeting for a specific time and place and make plans for it. Do not simply say at the time of announcements in the Sunday morning worship service, ‘As you may have heard, there has been an allegation of child abuse in our church, and now is just as good a time as any to discuss what happened.’ An impromptu invitation can be far more harmful than helpful. It may force members to participate in a discussion that they would very much prefer to avoid. It may shock members who have heard no previous reports or rumors. It may cause some members to suddenly remember previous trauma in their lives and evoke severe emotional reactions. Such an approach may also insult the family of the child victim by making it appear that child abuse

in your church is nothing more than an item on the list of Sunday morning announcements. The consequences of such a cavalier approach, in subsequent litigation, could be harmful for the church.”

The best approach to calling such a meeting is to give advanced notice that states the time and location of the congregational meeting. This allows individuals to determine if they wish to attend. It may be wise to have a representative from either the district credential’s committee (if the accused is a ministerial staff member) or the state office. It is recommended that a qualified counselor attend the meeting. Such meetings can stir strong feelings and emotions. The availability of a qualified counselor can help individuals address these strong feelings and emotions immediately.

Joy Thornburg Melton recommends the following occur during the congregational meeting:

- Fact sharing: Open the fact sharing by giving an accurate description of what has happened and what actions have been taken, or will be taken. Answer questions as accurately as possible without jeopardizing any ongoing investigation by the church or local law enforcement agencies. Protect the identity of the victim(s), especially if the family has requested as much privacy as possible. Do not be afraid to answer questions with, “We don’t know the answer to that yet.” It is far better to admit not knowing the answer than to speculate about the incident or the outcome.
- Small group sharing time: The small group sharing time probably will be the most important segment of this meeting. Divide the total group into small groups of five or six. Have prepared facilitators for each group. The facilitator will begin by letting everyone know that it is permissible to express any feeling or emotion within the small group. All will be allowed time to share, and there will be no debate about the feelings or emotions expressed. The purpose of this segment of the meeting is to help people identify and verbalize their feelings about the incident. The purpose is not to strategize a response or elicit premature forgiveness toward the abuser. Be prepared for this part of the meeting to take an hour or more.
- Closing moments of reflection and worship: When it is apparent that the small groups are able to bring their time together to a close, reassemble the whole group. Acknowledge the reality of this painful situation and offer a prayer for the congregation as it seeks to achieve justice for all involved and healing for all who are suffering.

What do we do in worship?

Worship services are not the place to air the situation. Worship services should continue as normal. If the situation is aired during worship, you can make people uncomfortable that don’t want to be a part of such a discussion. Worship services may also have visitors that have no understanding of what is taking place. Leave discussions to the congregational meetings.

For additional information or help creating a strategic plan for your church, contact Dr. Julie Nance at 812-945-3741. ALWAYS have an attorney review your strategic plan to make sure all laws for your state and locality are observed.

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