

SEXUAL ABUSE

WHERE DO I GO FOR

Help?



RCNA Sexual Abuse Committee

Prevention. Awareness. Guidance.



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01 INTRODUCTION

Daily, the sad reality of living in a broken world is seen around and among us. Sin manifests itself everywhere. All sins are damaging to the sinner. Some sins are particularly painful and damaging to the victim of the sin. This is especially true for sexual abuse.

As a church community we have a responsibility to stand up against the evil of sexual abuse, and to offer victims of sexual abuse the help and support they need.

Sexual abuse refers to any form of unwanted sexual contact. That includes sexual assault and sexual harassment. Sexual assault is any sexual activity without consent of the person subjected to it. This can range from touching any part of the body in a sexual way (even through clothes) to rape. Sexual harassment is any unwanted comment, gesture or action that is sexually suggestive in nature. This can include obscene language, sexual texts, exposure to pornography or nudity.

Anyone can be an abuser: parents, caregivers, relatives, siblings, friends, babysitters, spouse, anyone who knows the victim, or a stranger. Abusers can also be persons in a position of trust and/or authority. This includes teachers, office bearers, youth group leaders, supervisors and employers.

In Chapter 2 of this brochure, we will explain four possible ways for victims to be supported. Chapters 3 through 6 then give more information on each of these. Chapter 7 answers some frequently asked questions about sexual abuse.

We pray that the Lord will grant His help to those who are victims of the very serious sin of sexual abuse. We also wish and pray that it will please Him to bless His Word to bestow His mercies and gracious presence upon victims and bring abusers to sincere repentance of their sins, and a hating and fleeing of their sin.

02 WHERE DO I GO FOR HELP?

If you have experienced sexual abuse, there are a number of places you can go for help. They are described briefly in this chapter, and more details are given in the following chapters.

The Consistory

Consistory members, in particular the minister and the elders, are available to listen, to help and to offer pastoral support if you have experienced sexual abuse. The Consistory also has the responsibility to take disciplinary measures if the abuser belongs to our congregation. See Chapter 3 for more information.

The Confidential Advisor

For situations in which you do not feel comfortable contacting a Consistory member, you can reach out to a Confidential Advisor. Persons have been appointed by the Consistory as Confidential Advisors for sexual abuse. The Confidential Advisors will listen and keep your information confidential. They will only share your information with others with your knowledge and permission. See Chapter 4 for more information.

The Authorities

The Authorities include the police (RCMP) and child protection workers. In some situations, the Authorities must be informed. This is the case when the victim is under 19. In other cases, it is still recommended that the victim report the incident to the Authorities. If there is immediate danger, call 9-1-1 for the police. See Chapter 5 for more information.

The Counsellor

To address the emotional and mental consequences of sexual abuse, counselling will often be very valuable. See Chapter 6 for more information.

03 THE CONSISTORY

The Consistory has a responsibility for the spiritual needs of all its baptized and confessing members. Sexual abuse is sinful and deeply damaging, also spiritually. The stakes are tremendous: unrepentant perpetrators will be eternally lost, and mismanagement of cases can alienate victims (and their families) from the church and the means of grace.

The principal consideration of the church must always be the wellbeing of the souls of the victim and the perpetrator. Thus, the support the church provides for the physical and mental needs is also directed to this end. For cases of sexual abuse, the minister and the elders are the primary contact points within the Consistory for these victims.

SUPPORT OF THE VICTIM

If sexual abuse is reported to Consistory members, they have the responsibility to:

- Take victims and their reports extremely serious: it is a big step for victims to inform a Consistory member, they will not do this lightly. Provide a listening ear and offer pastoral support based on God's Word. Victims are always treated with dignity and respect.
- Recognize that it is not the role of a Consistory member to investigate criminal matters.
- Recommend (but not force) victims to report sexual abuse to the police.

SUPPORT OF THE VICTIM (CONTINUED)

- If victims are under the age of nineteen, report the abuse to the relevant authorities.
- Ensure, after discussion and consent of victim, that information about the case will not get lost and will be shared with at least one other consistory member.
- Otherwise, maintain strict confidentiality. No information is shared, even with other consistory members, without prior knowledge and consent of the victim.
- Share counselling options with victims.
- Offer the possibility of financial support for counselling.

PASTORAL CARE

In addressing sexual abuse, the support by Consistory members must especially focus on the spiritual wellbeing of all persons involved: our relationship to God. Difficult questions must be faced with empathy, such as: *If God hears prayer, why did He not hear my prayer when the abuse took place? Why do I have to bear the consequences all my life, while it seems the perpetrator just goes on with his life? Is that righteous in the eyes of God? How can I ever believe the perpetrator's betterment of his life? How will I ever be able to accept the thought that God might grant mercy to my perpetrator while I feel I can't forgive him? May I be angry with my perpetrator? Why should I even forgive the perpetrator?*

Listening is the most important thing. Victims' questions and concerns need to be heard. We should not be too fast in giving dogmatically correct answers. Victims need to know they may voice their deep religious concerns and doubts. Based on the information provided by the victim, the consistory will explore suitable ways to follow up with the victim and, if applicable, the alleged abuser.

Ultimately, we are called to speak of the only hope and comfort in times of deepest suffering and grief: the mercy of God and compassion of Christ granted to those who once lived in enmity against God but are sought by God because it is His good pleasure to build His Church.

FORGIVENESS

Sometimes, it is suggested that victims of sexual abuse should just forgive and move on. Statements like this show a lack of understanding of the nature of sexual abuse and its impact. We are called to forgive should the perpetrator repent. If a victim comes to the point that he or she is willing to forgive, even if the perpetrator never shows remorse, it can be very liberating.

We must carefully distinguish between the *willingness* to forgive and the *act* of granting forgiveness. Although all Christians are called to be forgiving, and to be willing to forgive upon sincere remorse of the abuser, the act of granting forgiveness and the timing of it can never be demanded or controlled by the perpetrator.

Coming to this point can be costly and painful. Forgiveness is not a passive process of forgetting or letting something fade over time. Neither is it excusing the sins that were committed against them as if it never happened or was insignificant. Rather, it is an active process of gradually letting go of the resentment towards the perpetrator.

Forgiveness does not imply that there will be a relationship of trust again between the victim and the perpetrator. Neither does it mean that the perpetrator will not have to face the legal consequences of his or her actions.

DISCIPLINE OF THE ABUSER

In situations where the abuser is a member of our congregation the process of church discipline begins when the consistory learns of the abuse. In this process, admonition, steps of censure, confession of guilt, and, in the case of hardened sinners who (as it states in the form) do not show “the least token of true repentance”, excommunication will be employed by the Consistory in dealing with a perpetrator. The principal aim of these measures is sincere repentance.

The Consistory must be convinced of the sincerity of the remorse before confession of guilt can take place. The Consistory applies discipline aiming at the spiritual wellbeing of its members. In the last chapter of this brochure the steps of church discipline are explained in more detail.

When the abuse becomes a matter of church discipline, the Consistory has the responsibility to also hear the alleged abuser. Multiple Consistory members need to be present when hearing the alleged abuser and minutes need to be taken. The alleged abuser needs to be questioned seriously and persistently, knowing that false allegations of sexual abuse are very rare.

In cases where the perpetrator confesses to the abuse and the civil authorities are not aware of the confession, the perpetrator must agree that the civil authorities will be notified and thereby face any possible criminal consequences of their sin. Confession of guilt can only take place after this has been completed *and* the Consistory is convinced there is sincere remorse to the victim for forgiveness.

In those cases, in which a court has decided the perpetrator to be guilty, confession of guilt can only take place after the criminal sentence has been completed *and* if the Consistory is convinced

DISCIPLINE OF THE ABUSER (CONTINUED)

there is sincere remorse. This will need to include a sincere request to the victim for forgiveness.

Some situations may be very difficult, especially if: there is no criminal conviction and the alleged perpetrator continues to maintain his or her innocence. These situations are hard for the person who reported the abuse. He or she may feel to be left alone. However, the Consistory has no authority to judge whether a crime was committed. Therefore, in those situations the Consistory can not demand confession of guilt for that crime.

The Consistory continues to be responsible to provide pastoral support and will do its utmost to protect the safety and wellbeing of the person who reported sexual abuse and the congregation in general.



04 THE CONFIDENTIAL ADVISOR

ROLE AND RESPONSIBILITIES

The Consistory has appointed Confidential Advisors to act as an alternative first point of contact for reports or complaints of sexual abuse. The role of the Confidential Advisors is to provide initial support to baptized and confessing members of our congregation wishing to report or seek help in dealing with sexual abuse. The initial support may involve providing a listening ear, and, after determining the nature and severity of the report or complaint, advising the member on whether or not to take further action, which may include:

- Sharing the report with a pastor or elder
- Assisting the complainant in making a report to the police or Ministry of Children and Family Development
- Referring to professional counselling

The Confidential Advisor's role is not to provide pastoral care, counselling, legal assistance, or arbitration.

The Confidential Advisors are accountable to the RCNA Chilliwack consistory but will not share any personal or identifiable information. All personal information will be treated with utmost care and confidentiality. Confidential Advisors may seek advice from or consult with the other Confidential Advisors. If personal details need to be discussed with other Confidential Advisors, this will only be done with the permission of the complainant. A Confidential Advisor may need to refer to another Confidential Advisor for personal reasons. Such referral will only take place in consultation with the victim.

In the case of the sexual abuse of a child or youth under 19 years of age, the Confidential Advisor has a legal responsibility to make a report to the Ministry of Children and Family Development.

ROLE AND RESPONSIBILITIES (CONTINUED)

The following Confidential Advisors have been appointed:



MIRIAM HOFKINK

Email: miriam.confidentialadvisor@gmail.com *

Phone: (403) 332-2009

*preferred method of contact



JOANNE DE ROVER

Email: joanne.confidentialadvisor@gmail.com

Phone: (604) 997-5103



HENK KLAASSEN

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JOLENE PANNEKOEK

Email: jolene.confidentialadvisor@gmail.com

Phone: (604) 316-4017

05 THE AUTHORITIES

Sexual abuse is a crime and it is the role of the civil authorities to deter and punish it. In BC, anyone who has reason to believe that a child or youth under 19 has been or is likely to be abused has a legal obligation to report this. The authorities have the necessary investigative powers (the police) and judicial powers (the court system) to determine if the person is guilty and their sentence. Failure of the authorities in either of these roles does not entail a transfer of responsibility to the church. The church has no authority to undertake criminal investigations. This must be left to the civil authorities.

If sexual abuse has been reported to the Authorities before the Consistory has become aware of it, it is recommended that the victim will inform the Consistory. At this point, the process of Church Discipline will have to begin, also taking into account the safety of victims and to avoid more victims will be made.

When we speak of Authorities in the context of sexual abuse, we think of the following three bodies:

CHILD PROTECTION WORKER

For victims who are minors (under 19 years old), the Child, Family and Community Services Act (CFCSA) requires that anyone who has reason to believe that a child or youth has been or is likely to be abused, and that the parent is unwilling or unable to protect the child or youth, must report the suspected abuse or neglect to a child welfare worker. You have the legal duty to report your concern to a child protection worker.

Phone **1-800-663-9122** at any time of the day or night.

THE POLICE

We recommend victims of sexual abuse report the incident to the police which is the RCMP. When a sexual abuse incident is reported to the police they are responsible for restoring order, protecting victims, investigating and gathering evidence. This may involve arresting or taking into custody the perpetrator of the abuse. If the investigation finds reasonable and probable grounds that a crime has been committed, the police can recommend criminal charges. Even if criminal charges are not laid, an individual can apply for a protection order for protection from another person. A protection order can prohibit or limit contact to try to prevent further harassment or harm.

THE COURT

The decision to lay a charge, resulting in court proceedings rests with prosecutors known as Crown Counsel. If, based on the evidence Crown counsel determines there is a substantial likelihood of conviction and whether a prosecution is required in the public interest, a charge may be laid against the alleged abuser.

A person charged with a criminal offence has to appear in court. It is important to remember that even though a person has been charged with an offense, they are considered innocent until proven guilty. For the court to convict the accused, Crown counsel must prove the person is guilty beyond reasonable doubt. If the court finds the person guilty, the judge will determine the sentence.

THE COURT (CONTINUED)

The impact of reporting abuse to the authorities on victims may never be underestimated. The process of reporting, being questioned, and faced with a court process can be painful for a victim. However, the church does not conceal criminal acts of its members, but instead encourages its members to report criminal acts to the authorities. The consistory will also support its members in this difficult process.

If you have questions about this process or want help in making a decision to contact the police, we encourage you to reach out to a Consistory member or one of the Confidential Advisors.



06 THE COUNSELLOR

Sexual abuse often has a significant impact on the mental health of the victims and their families. It could impact their wellbeing and how they function on a daily basis. Coping with this can be a challenge and working through this may seem impossible.

Every victim responds to traumatic events in their own way. The effects of the trauma can be short-term or long-term. Those who have experienced abuse, generally deal with difficult and painful emotions. Abuse can impact victims in various ways, i.e.: physically, emotionally, spiritually and behaviorally. For example, many find it difficult to trust others and engage in or maintain relationships. Others may struggle with their (sexual) identity and experience misplaced guilt. It is not uncommon to notice changes in behavioural patterns and character. This, in turn, can lead to isolation or unhealthy choices to cope with their pain and unanswered questions. Victims of abuse sometimes struggle spiritually and wonder why God allowed their abuse to happen.

Most victims suffer in silence. Often, they have been told to not speak about it or that they are to be blamed for the abuse themselves. This often makes it difficult to reach out for help or speak about it with others.

Counselling helps to manage emotions and behaviors through education and exploring coping strategies that help the person move forward in their healing and lives.

THE COUNSELLOR (CONTINUED)

Both the Consistory and the Confidential Advisor can recommend counsellors. Financial constraints may never be a reason for not receiving the counseling support that is needed. The Consistory and the Confidential Advisor have ways to provide financial support. If required, the Confidential Advisor(s) can ensure that financial support is provided by the Consistory on an anonymous basis.



07 QUESTIONS & ANSWERS

Q. What if I'm not a victim myself, but I know of sexual abuse?

- If you know of abuse of a minor (under 19) you have the legal duty to report your concern to a child protection worker. Phone **1-800-663-9122** at any time, day or night.
- In other cases, contact the person abused and point them to the resources described in this brochure: the Consistory, the Confidential Advisor, the Authorities, and the Counsellor.
- If the victim has shared this information with you, it is important to listen: do not judge or reprimand. It is the person's experience and the repercussions of abuse can be far reaching. Abuse from many years ago may still contribute to behaviors or reactions to situations that seem out of place.
- If you feel the safety of the victim is at stake and you are not able to influence the situation, contact the Consistory and/or the police.
- Do not share this information with anyone other than the Consistory, a Confidential Advisor or the police. Sharing this information with others can lead to rumors and have devastating effects on the victim and others involved.

Q. What if I'm not a victim myself, but I suspect sexual abuse?

- In cases of suspected abuse where the identity of the alleged abuser is known, in a Christian congregation you need to first go to the alleged abuser, following the rules of Matthew 18.
- In case of your safety being at stake when going to the alleged abuser, contact the Confidential Advisor or the Consistory for advice.
- In case you suspect someone is being abused, but you do not know the identity of the abuser, contact the Consistory for advice.
- Do not initiate any personal investigations. Regardless of your education or experience, you are not authorized for this, and such investigation may turn out to be harmful to victims and damaging to criminal investigations that may have to take place.

Q. How should Matthew 18 be applied in relation to sexual abuse?

Matthew 18 sets the general rule for trespasses of members of the congregation against other members:

Go and tell him his fault between thee and him alone: if he shall hear thee, thou hast gained thy brother. But if he will not hear thee, then take with thee one or two more, that in the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established. And if he shall neglect to hear them, tell it unto the church.

Matthew 18 is the general rule, however it does not apply to all situations.

- It only regards private sins (sins known only to one or few members of the congregation). It does not apply to public sins.
- Even while sexual abuse often will be a private sin, victims of sexual abuse (and other forms of violence) cannot be required to first go the offender to tell him his sin, because their safety will be at stake. They have the following options:
 1. Because sexual abuse is a criminal offense, victims are allowed and recommended to report to the police or other authorities. It is not required to first follow the steps of Matthew 18.
 2. Victims of sexual abuse may contact the minister or an elder to receive advice and help in any case. For this it is not required to first follow the steps of Matthew 18. This is different from “tell it unto the church”, by which is meant a formal report to the consistory with the purpose of church discipline to be performed.
 3. Victims of sexual abuse may contact the Confidential Adviser of the congregation to receive advice and help. It is not required to first follow the steps of Matthew 18.
 4. If victims of sexual abuse will choose not to follow steps 1, 2 or 3, they may ask a parent, a relative, or close friend to follow the steps of Matthew 18 for or with him / her.

It is important to understand that the witnesses mentioned in Matthew are witnesses to the conversations that take place following Matthew 18. They do not need to be witnesses of the abuse incident that took place.

Q. How can we trust our authorities in matters of sexual abuse if we know they don't follow Christian principles?

Sexual abuse is a crime, and it is the role of the state powers to deter and punish it. The church has no authority to investigate or punish in criminal matters.

In Romans 13:4 Paul commands us to be subject unto the higher powers which are ordained by God:

For he is the minister of God to thee for good. But if thou do that which is evil, be afraid; for he beareth not the sword in vain: for he is the minister of God, a revenger to execute wrath upon him that doeth evil.

Our Belgic Confession states in Article 36: “We believe that our gracious God, because of the depravity of mankind, hath appointed kings, princes, and magistrates, willing that the world should be governed by certain laws and policies; to the end that the dissoluteness of men might be restrained, and all things carried on among them with good order and decency. For this purpose He hath invested the magistracy with the sword, for the punishment of evil doers, and for the praise of them that do well.”

Please note that both the words of Paul and the words of the Belgic confession were written in a time that the government was not Christian at all. They apply in our time as well.

Q. What is meant by ‘Church discipline’? What are the steps of Church discipline?

Church discipline is the process of dealing with sins within the congregation. Both members and the consistory have a responsibility. Church discipline is applied in two phases: Admonition and Censure.

A. Admonition: in case of private sins, there is a duty for a member to act in accordance with Matthew 18 (in case of sexual abuse we have documented the exceptions). When these private admonitions fail, or if the sin is public by nature, it becomes a matter for the Consistory. The Consistory will then begin its admonition, with the aim of bringing the sinner to the acknowledgment of his guilt. In case of a private sin this is done before the Consistory. In case of public sins, it needs to be done before the congregation. Confession of guilt may only take place if the Consistory is convinced that there is sincere remorse and in the case of criminal matters, the other conditions described in Chapter 3 are also satisfied.

Already in the admonition phase of church discipline, the Consistory can deny a person access to the sacraments and from attending members meetings. This action is referred to as ‘silent censure’ because it is not announced to the congregation.

If repeated admonitions by the Consistory fail, and the person shows no signs of repentance, discipline will move to the next phase and censure will be applied.

B. Censure consist of three steps: Step 1, Step 2, and Excommunication.

At Step 1, a public announcement to the congregation is made that a member is put under the first step of censure for sin against a specified commandment. At this stage the name of the member is not mentioned. The congregation is asked to pray for the transgressor. The announcement read is the First Exhortation provided in the Liturgy for Excommunication from the Congregation in the back of our Psalter. During this phase the admonitions by the Consistory continue.

If the transgressor does not repent, Censure advances to Step 2. This stage can only be done with advice of the Classis. Now the name of the transgressor is announced in the congregation including the commandment against which the sin was committed. Again, admonitions by the Consistory will continue. During this stage, the announcements made are the Second Exhortation provided in the Liturgy for Excommunication from the Congregation and if required, the Third Exhortation.

Again, the objective of censure is to bring the sinner to repent of their sin. The process and requirements for confession of guilt are the same as what is described above in the Admonition phase. Except the confession of guilt for both private and public sins must be done publicly because the offense has become public because the admonitions of the Church were despised. When the person does confession of guilt, censure is lifted.

If the transgressor continues to harden himself, ultimately Excommunication will have to take place. The Form for Excommunication, which is in the back of our Psalter, is read during a church service.





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