

## Abuse in Homes and Church Communities

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### A. Introduction

National surveys undertaken by royal commissions, panels and Statistics Canada have left little doubt that situations of abuse occur frequently in Canada. At least 20,000 children are abused each year in Canada. Our best estimates are that 1 in 4 girls are abused at some point in their childhoods and 1 in 6 boys. If a 1991 survey of the Christian Reformed denomination can be used as a yardstick for other church communities, then the frequency of abuse in Canadian society as a whole is echoed in Christian homes as well. The Christian Reformed Church survey disclosed alarming percentages of persons reporting physical abuse or neglect (12%), sexual abuse (13%) or emotional abuse (19%)<sup>1</sup> In a survey among Mennonites in Winnipeg, almost 20% reported being sexually abused.<sup>2</sup> Surveys of clergy have reported alarming rates of sexual abuse in particular.<sup>3</sup>

Abuse thrives in an atmosphere of denial. Too often, the church has been and continues to be party to this denial. It remains difficult for Christians to come to terms with the facts that Christians and clergy are abusers. It is an unacceptable reality. In denying that abuse exists, the church assists abusers and compounds the consequences of the abuse.

The church must address the issues of abuse. We must work towards prevention of abuse in homes and in churches and assist in the healing of the victims of abuse.

### B. Definition of Abuse

The word “abuse” derives from the word “use” and means “to use so as to injure or damage”(Webster’s *New Collegiate Dictionary*). Abuse can have many forms: physical abuse, neglect, emotional abuse and sexual abuse. It generally involves the misuse of power and authority. Because abuse has legal implications, it is important that we also understand legal definitions of abuse.

#### *Marriage*

Within marriage, sexual intimacy without the consent of both spouses is legally defined as sexual assault.<sup>4</sup> In fact, any physical touching without consent is assault and constitutes a criminal offence.<sup>5</sup> This certainly includes any violence against a spouse such as kicking or hitting or threatening to be violent. Within the context of family law, emotional abuse is a pattern of behaviour which includes degrading, dehumanizing or neglecting a spouse which results in the spouse feeling worthless. One case defines it this way:

If in the marriage relationship one spouse by his conduct causes wanton, malicious or unnecessary infliction of pain or suffering upon the body, the feelings or emotions of the other, his conduct may well constitute cruelty<sup>6</sup>.

#### *Children*

Abuse of children is defined in the Criminal Code. It includes any sexual activity which a child does not fully comprehend and to which the child is unable to give informed consent, including touching or exposing of private parts.<sup>7</sup> Children under 12 are never considered able to consent to sexual activity. Children between 12 and 14 are deemed unable to consent to sexual acts except under specific circumstances involving sexual activity with their peers.<sup>8</sup> Young persons between 14 and 18 are protected from sexual exploitation and their consent is not valid if the person touching them for a sexual purpose is in a position of trust or authority over them or if they are in a relationship of dependency with that person.

Physical abuse would include violence or threatened violence against the child. According to the Criminal Code, corporal punishment is not of itself considered abuse but the punishment must be in the context of discipline, it must be “reasonable” and it must not physically harm the child.<sup>9</sup> Emotional abuse includes degrading, dehumanizing or neglecting a child as a pattern of behaviour resulting in the

child feeling worthless and unloved.

There is a requirement in all provincial child welfare legislation to report any suspected case of abuse of a child to the Children's Aid Society.<sup>10</sup>

#### *Church Workers*

Abuse of a congregant in a legal sense is usually sexual abuse.<sup>11</sup> The pastor is recognized to be in a position of power or authority over congregants. For this reason, in law, this relationship is one of a fiduciary; that is, of the strictest standard of integrity. In a pastoral counselling relationship, any sexual conduct is considered abuse, regardless of who initiates the sexual contact. In other situations, where the pastor uses the authority relationship to initiate sexual activity, that too would be considered abuse.

Lay leaders in counselling relationships are in a similar position to the pastor, that is, one of the strictest integrity. It is the responsibility of the counsellor to maintain sexual boundaries.<sup>12</sup> The section on abuse of children pertains to child abuse in a church context.

A current field of study not addressed in this paper is the abuse of pastors by congregations.

### **C. Biblical Principles of Family and Church Relationships**

Jesus tells us that the hallmark of being a Christian is loving one another (John 15:12-17). The second greatest commandment is to "love your neighbour as yourself" (Matt. 22:39). John, "the apostle of love," reminds us that if we do not love others in practical ways, we cannot claim that the love of God is in us (1 John 3:11-24). The New Testament repeatedly elevates Jesus as our example. He willingly laid down his life for us. And we are to pattern our lives after his.

Abuse is a manifestation of the failure to emulate Christ in family or church relationships.

#### *Marriage*

The New Testament instruction about proper marriage relationships builds from the concept of one flesh set forth in Genesis 2:23-24. Foundational to the New Testament teaching is the principle of mutual submission. Husbands and wives are to submit to each other (Eph. 5:21; 1 Cor. 7:3-5).

Paul and Peter charge husbands love their wives as they love themselves (1 Pet. 3:7; Eph.5:25-33) and "as Christ loved the church"(Eph. 5:25,33). Every husband is to love his wife in the

sacrificial, servant manner that our Lord loved us. A husband is to care for his wife both physically and spiritually. So important is the husband's role in maintaining a wholesome marriage that wrong treatment of one's wife endangers a man's relationship with God (1. Pet 3:7).

The apostles direct wives, in turn to "submit" to their husbands "as unto the Lord" (Eph. 5:21). This does not mean that a woman must become a "door mat" or lose her personal identity, but that she honour her husband because of his God-given role in their marriage.

Husbands and wives are accountable to God for their treatment of each other. They are also accountable to the body of Christ which has a responsibility to teach these right relationships.

#### *Children*

The Bible entrusts to parents the responsibility for educating their children (Prov. 22:6). Specifically, parents (especially fathers) are to teach their children about God (Deut. 6:7; Eph. 6:1-4). The training of children also includes the use of appropriate discipline (Prov. 23:13)<sup>13</sup> But in fulfilling their responsibility, parents must avoid "exasperating" their children (Eph. 6:4).

As parents bring up their children "in the training and instruction of the Lord" (Eph. 6:4), children are to honour and obey their parents (Eph. 6:1-3; Ex. 20:14). Children honour their parents because of the role God has given father and mother in the family.<sup>14</sup> And while its expression may change, this honouring continues even after the children become adults.

#### *Church Workers*

Christ described himself as "the Good Shepherd"(John 10). His example is worthy of emulation by every church leader. Paul directed pastors and other leaders to serve as overseers of God's people (Acts 20:28). This role includes nurturing and caring for the congregation they serve. They are to provide servant leadership (Matt. 20:26; Mark 10:43), however, never "lording it over" those whom God has entrusted into their care (1 Pet. 5:3).

### **D. Our Source of Comfort and Healing**

Where there is brokenness in the face of abuse, God offers us hope. Psalm 18:6 says:

In my distress I called to the Lord;  
I cried to God for my help.  
From his temple he heard my voice;  
my cry came before him, into his ears.

God listens to those who are in need. He is never so close as in the crisis of our lives. He hears the cry of the victim of abuse. Furthermore, he offers comfort, as 2 Cor. 1:3-4 tells us:

Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles.

Also, Deut. 33:27:

The eternal Father is your refuge and underneath are the everlasting arms.

God is the source of all compassion; he offers us healing and redemption. For people who have been deprived of love, or who have been victims of abuse, the perfect love of God can drive out all fear. Our response to abuse must be based on this redemptive vision, and driven by the hope we have in the living Christ.

## E. Understanding Abuse

In abusive relationships, the authority relationship has been abdicated because there is a pattern of abusive behaviour. We must recognize that this is sin.

Abusive relationships are characterized by the following:

- a) a violation of the integrity of the relationship,
- b) a misuse of power,
- c) a disregard for personal dignity, and
- d) a betrayal of trust.

When abuse occurs, not only is the relationship between the persons involved distorted but the relationships between God and each of the persons has also been violated. We have a biblical mandate to restore broken relationships and particularly to heal a broken relationship with God.<sup>15</sup>

### *Violation of the Relationship's Integrity*

The Bible calls us to live with integrity in all relationships. This integrity requires us to respect the personhood of the individuals in the relationship as well as the boundaries of the roles we have within that relationship. When the boundaries are crossed, the relationship is distorted from the biblical mandate.

In the case of marriage, for example, the boundaries are set by love, respect and the personal identities of each spouse. When each spouse loves and respects the other, the relationship has

integrity. Integrity means not asserting one's own interests or desires, but respecting the boundaries and encouraging the personhood of the other, thus allowing the other to maintain his or her God-created uniqueness.

In parent-child relationships, the boundaries are shaped by the relationship of trust which exists between the parent and child, and by the parent's role and responsibility to nurture, guide and protect the child. Parents must exercise their parental role in accordance with the standards set out in the Bible.

In the church, boundaries are set by the role of the pastor or church leader. That role, as set out in 1 Tim. 3, is that of overseer and leader. His relationship with the congregation should be characterized by the highest degree of integrity (1 Tim. 3:2). A pastor has been given the utmost trust by the entire congregation. He is always in the role of pastor and cannot step out of it to become "lover", "dictator" or "ruler".

In abusive situations, the boundaries defined by roles and personal identity have been violated. A husband who batters his wife sees her as his property rather than as a unique person. In such cases, the husband treats his wife as an extension of himself and thus a ready object on which to vent frustration. A wife who constantly berates her husband in public treats him as an object rather than as a husband. A father committing incest with his daughter has replaced his role of father with that of a lover/abuser, and has forced his daughter to abandon her role as daughter for that of a victim. A pastor initiating sexual relations with a congregant sees him or her as a lover rather than a congregant. The abused person is violated at the very core of his or her being.

### *Misuse of Power*

Power is the ability to influence or affect the attitude and conduct of others. Legitimate use of power flows from authority and responsibility.

In marriage, each partner is responsible for the other. Spouses have power, therefore, to influence the other. This power can be used biblically to enhance the other or it can be misused to tear down or harm.

In a family situation, parents have responsibility for their children; they must use the power entrusted to them to exercise their parental responsibilities for nurturing and sustaining the physical, mental, emotional and spiritual growth and health of their children. Parents sometimes use their power to mould their children in their own image, rather than allowing children to unfold in God's image.

God has entrusted pastors with the responsibility to give the congregation spiritual direction. Pastors can misuse their power to meet their own needs, not only in a sexual context but also in meeting a personal desire for domination.

When power is exercised to effect the will of the person holding it, rather than to effect God's will, that power is being misused. Poor stewardship of power stems from a breakdown in the power-holder's relationship to God and in one's unwillingness to exercise one's gift in submission to God and those whom one is called to serve.

The most obvious misuse of power is in its physical manifestation: beating or sexually abusing. The misuse of power can be just as devastating, however, when it takes on verbal form such as constant criticism, the use of demeaning language, or threats of violence. Neglect, or withdrawal of love, is also a form of abuse.

#### *Disregard for Human Dignity*

Our lives have dignity as God's creation. Our relationships should reflect a high regard for this dignity. In a relationship where power is misused, the abuser has lost the ability to see dignity in the person who is being abused. The abuser no longer values that person for who that person is.

The abuser has also disregarded his or her own dignity. No person seeking to reflect God and model Christ in his or her life could abuse others. If such a claim is made, the abuser's perception of God is flawed.

#### *Violation of Trust*

All relationships must have some degree of trust in order to function at all. Children must be able to trust that a parent wishes the best for them, and spouses must be able to trust that each seeks to work for the mutual benefit of both. Congregants must be able to trust their clergy.

In abusive relationships, that trust has been violated. The abuser is not using the power and trust given him or her for the good of the victim, but to meet the needs of the abuser.

As abusive relationships unfold, the victims of abuse often blame themselves for the abuse, and see themselves as unworthy of the love of the person abusing them and thus deserving of the abusive treatment. At this point, the victim still trusts the motivations of the abuser.

In many situations of abuse, the victim comes to see that such trust in the abuser has been seriously violated or destroyed.

Eventually the victim is no longer able to perceive goodness or love in the parent or marriage partner. It becomes very difficult for the child or spouse to give love or display goodness in return.

## **F. Consequences of Abuse**

The consequences of abuse are manifold. Abuse affects every part of a person's being—body, mind, soul and spirit. This is true of both the abused and the abuser. For both, abuse can lead to separation from God as well as serious consequences in relationships with others.

For the abused person, in most cases, physical consequences, while most visible, are the first to heal. The damage to ways of thinking, feeling and relating spiritually is more difficult to determine, and usually heals much more slowly.

The effects of abuse on a person's mental and emotional health have been well documented. The long-term results of any kind of abuse include loss of self esteem, feelings of powerlessness, betrayal, and, in the case of sexual abuse, traumatic sexualization. Less well understood by Christians are the spiritual consequences of abuse.

For the abused person, power becomes something to be feared or else taken up to be wielded in revenge. Trust is a meaningless value, human dignity is imperceptible in oneself and others, and boundaries in relationships become irrelevant. This has tremendous repercussions for a person's ability to relate to God as well as to others. Trust in God and submission to the will of God are at the core of our faith. However, for the victim of abuse, trusting and submitting require being vulnerable. In the past, being vulnerable has resulted in being abused. Consequently, many abused persons find it difficult either to trust God or to submit to his will for their lives because, to them, that is equivalent to setting oneself up for further abuse. Children abused by their fathers have a very difficult time understanding God as a positive father figure. In addition, the victim feels unlovable, even by God.

An abused person has been shattered at the very core of his or her being. This often leads to difficulty in knowing oneself. It can also lead to difficulties with sexuality and in understanding masculinity or femininity. An abused person is thus often separated from being the person God created.

In the case of abusers, the effects of sin are apparent in their actions. Often an abuser will have suffered as a victim of abuse earlier in life. Whether or not prior abuse is to blame for their distorted perceptions, emotions and spirituality, abusers' relationships to God are damaged through the behaviour. They

too have a distorted understanding of who God is, they too doubt God's goodness. As suggested earlier, a person will be a poor steward of the power which is entrusted to him or her if he or she lacks the willingness to submit to God and use that power for God's ends. Thus, pride is often mingled with the warped self-image that may live in the soul of the abuser.

Within the church, the spiritual consequences of abuse by pastors are many and deep. The victim suffers directly in an inability to trust both other pastors and God. The congregation as a whole usually feels abused and very angry that the relationship of trust has been broken.

## G. Towards Healing

Wounded spirits make for wounded servants. As we are called to serve in God's kingdom, we must take the time to tend to the hurts of our fellow-servants, and possibly our own, by calling on God's grace in prayer and living in God's grace daily. The church community as a whole has an important role to play in listening, caring and loving both the abuser and the abused. Too often, our churches have been places of judgment or fear.

Situations of abuse are frequently of long duration and will require counselling as well as caring and prayer. Churches can utilize the resources of the community. There are often qualified Christian therapists, counsellors and psychologists at hand. Special care needs to be taken if pastors are to counsel abusers or victims.<sup>16</sup>

As Christians, our concern regarding the issue of abuse should have a dual focus: the restoration of the persons who have been hurt by abuse (both abused and abuser), and the building of strong ministries in God's kingdom through prevention of abuse.

All Christians, no matter what their particular gifts, are called by God to minister his grace to a sinful and broken world. We can only do so if we experience God's grace for ourselves in the healing of our own relationships. The healing of relationships requires first the healing of the persons in those relationships.

For reconciliation to take place in abuse situations the abuser must truly repent, and the abused must truly forgive. Reconciliation between the two may be the desired end result but is never guaranteed, since repentance—for which the abuser is responsible—and forgiveness—for which the abused is responsible—are difficult enough to achieve singly, much less jointly. Where an abuser does not repent or ask for

forgiveness, the abused should be able to look to the caring community of the church for help to heal the wounds and to forgive. Healing is a process which is most often gradual, rather than instantaneous. A person may be healed in different ways at different times of his or her life. Professional counselling is also advisable.

Repentance and forgiveness are concepts which are readily looked to in abuse situations, but often are misunderstood and thus misapplied. The result can sometimes be a false reconciliation, into which one or both parties have been pushed, and which often results in a repeat of the abuse which occurred earlier.

### *Repentance*

Repentance should be understood as implying not simply remorse but a complete reversal of thinking and behaviour. An abuser's understanding of how a parent should relate to a child or how spouses should relate to their partner must be evidenced in new behaviour. True repentance will lead to actions which demonstrate that the former abuser now values the personal dignity of the other and wishes to regain his or her trust. Such repentance will also result in the former abuser's ability to use power in submission to God's will and the needs of others.

### *Forgiveness*

Forgiveness should not be confused with forgetting abuse or with reconciliation. True forgiveness on the part of an abused person occurs when he or she becomes willing not to erase the memory of past abuse but to prevent the memory from having an ongoing hold on his or her life. Christ forgave us, acknowledging fully our sin against himself. He neither minimized or excused away our sin. Rather, he acknowledged the extent of it and chose, in the light of that knowledge, to fully forgive us. In the same way, survivors of abuse need to fully acknowledge the extent of the damage done to them because of the abuse, and then, in light of that knowledge, move to a point of forgiveness. Forgiveness allows an abused person to shed the bitterness and hatred that rob the abused person of healthy relationships with God and others. Forgiveness is part of God's way for redeeming and repairing destruction.

The power of forgiveness rests first of all in its healing effect on the person who is abused, and secondarily in its potential for bringing about healing in the relationship with the abuser. It may also have a redemptive and healing effect on the abuser.

### *Reconciliation*

Reconciliation requires true repentance on the part of the abuser and forgiveness on the part of the abused. The abuser must also stop the abuse and begin to form a relationship characterized by the biblical view of the relationship. In a marriage situation, both partners must be empowered to exercise their gifts and roles within a relationship characterized by the mutual submission described by the apostle Paul in Ephesians 5. There must be a proper use of power in parent-child relationships, in which the parent has authority over the child.

The dignity of the abused must be recognized by the former abuser, who must also work to uphold the integrity of the relationship. Most difficult of all, the former abuser must act in such a way as to convince the formerly abused person that he or she can once again place trust in the one who has betrayed it so badly in the past. This will frequently require the former abuser to seek healing. Most abusers have been abused in the past and this will lead to a pattern of abusing others. Without healing, the pattern of abuse is likely to be repeated.

In a church setting, reconciliation should be initiated along with appropriate disciplinary action of the church worker.

## **H. Towards Prevention of Abuse in Families**

Prevention of abuse requires measures to ensure that power is used properly, human dignity is regarded, trust is not betrayed and relationships have integrity.

In the case of a marriage relationship, the apostles frequently intertwine teaching on relationships in marriage with teaching on the relationship of Christ to the church. Therefore, churches must be modelling proper use of power. Churches also have a responsibility to teach positive relationships in marriage and family. Churches with a hierarchical model of authority must take steps to ensure that adherents are not using this to legitimize tendencies to abusive behaviour.

Whatever particular roles of each spouse, the Bible is clear that the relationship is to be characterized by love and respect. Love does not hurt but instead seeks to nurture and enhance the life of the other. A marriage relationship which is characterized by the deep love akin to the love of Christ for his church has no place for abusive behaviour.

In the case of a parent-child relationship, we can state that abuse is not likely to occur when parents use the power to exercise their authority wisely, hold their children in high esteem, and ensure that both parents and children act within

their appropriate roles. Such parents, acting consistently, will behave in a trustworthy manner, and will earn the trust of their children.

There are a number of practical steps churches can take in this direction. There are many resources available like of Sunday school curriculum or materials and speakers for men's or women's meetings. There are ministries in Canada for the abused. There are also ministries with a particular focus on marriage enhancement which teach biblical models of marriage. Sermons on this subject are also appropriate, not one time only but on a periodic basis. Above all, the church needs to create an atmosphere which is conducive to people sharing their difficulties and finding acceptance and assistance. We need to deal with these issues before they come before the criminal courts.

Pastors may often have hints from members of the congregation that something is wrong in their families. These should not be ignored. There are resources in the community to assist with anger management counselling and marriage and family counselling from a biblical perspective. If these are not available in a local community, consideration may be given to arranging for a lay person or pastor to have training in these areas.

Sermons and Sunday school lessons addressing the issues of abuse will implicitly give people the message that this is a place where they can talk about the very real issue of abuse, be believed that such things can happen in the church community, and find the help they need for healing.

## **I. Pastor/Church Worker Abuse**

Abusive relationships leave life-long scars on both the victim and the abuser. When the abuse occurs within the supposedly safe confines of the local church, the spiritual ramifications of these wounds are extensive. It is critical to address not only issues of misused power and broken trust, but also the shattering of the victim's image of a loving, just and perfect God. Where the abuser is concerned, it may become evident that he or she never had an honest relationship with God, or that the relationship is suffering and skewed.

If the church is to be a place as described in Acts 2 (devotion to God and to one another; concern for one another's needs; a group of people respected by the wider community) then it must be a leader in addressing society's ills. It must not ignore the threat of abuse; rather, recognizing the humanness of its members, it must be solidly prepared to encounter abuse. The church must educate its membership about the potential for

abuse and it must have a clear and well-publicized policy in place before a complaint is ever made.

The problem of abuse should be presented to congregations as any other instructive teaching. Abuse should be clearly viewed as contrary to the church's mandate to help the body of believers become Christ-like, to love and respect one another, to build one another up before God. The congregation should understand that abuse will never be tolerated, that it will be dealt with openly and honestly, not covered up. As well, processes for healing should be wide-reaching, available to the victim as well as the abuser. Response to abuse should be expected to be according to the terms of a just and compassionate God.

It is important to realize that incidents of abuse will not occur simply at the pastoral level. Abusers could be Sunday school teachers, youth leaders, nursery workers, custodial staff or deacons/trustees - the list, obviously, is long. Policies for dealing with complaints should apply to all these situations, perhaps adjusted according to the degree of authority held by the abuser.

For the purposes of this discussion, our suggestions will focus on adult relationships, although the criteria suggested also applies to children. Any complaint or suspicion of abuse involving children must, according to law, be immediately directed to the appropriate child-welfare agencies.<sup>17</sup> In many cases of adult abuse, engaging the criminal justice system will also be appropriate.<sup>18</sup> In the cases of both children and adults, however, churches should not expect that simply engaging the judicial system clears them of responsibilities for assisting the individuals to heal. Wherever possible, these efforts should continue in conjunction with outside agencies.

#### *The Need for a Written Policy*

It is imperative that churches develop a written policy to deal with complaints of abuse. Establishing such a policy before a complaint is raised will achieve several important goals. First, the policy will be formulated in an atmosphere of clear, proactive thinking. If the policy is established in the midst of a complaint the atmosphere is likely to be explosive and emotional. Second, the congregation can be informed of the policy in an objective manner, without personalities involved or the rumour of wrongdoing on the part of leadership.

New leadership (either pastor or lay) should be given the policy with opportunity for healthy discussion before beginning their term. The policy can be used as a teaching tool instructing the entire congregation as to appropriate relationships.

Each complainant will be dealt with according to set criteria, guarding against accusations such as cover-ups or favouritism. Each respondent to an accusation of abuse will be dealt with according to a set of criteria so there should be little room for accusations of "guilty until proven innocent".

Discipline policies should also provide for reconciliation follow-up for both church workers and abused.

The development of a comprehensive policy sends a message to congregations: all complaints of abuse are to be taken seriously and will be dealt with in a just and documented manner. This also sends the message to potential abusers that abuse will not be tolerated. (See the Appendix for guidelines to developing a policy.)

#### *Preventative Measures*

Admitting that abuse occurs within the church is the first step towards prevention and penetrating the denial that has historically existed within the church. There are steps that can be taken to prevent abuse by pastors.

Pastors or church workers should never act under their own authority. Pastors, deacons, elders—in fact, all who are engaged in church work—should be accountable to one another. Pastors should not be left to minister in a vacuum. A mentor or spiritual confidante can serve as a listener/advocate/advisor to encourage and support the pastor as well as provide some accountability. The relationship between pastoral staff/lay leadership and deacons or elders should be clearly defined and include measures of accountability. Non-denominational or autonomous churches will need to develop their own system of accountability. Accountability should be expressed through self-examination, to a peer or group of peers and before God. This means that a pastor must have time in his or her schedule for this type of accountability.

Checking in to the history of a new pastor, or lay leader, is often a difficult task. However, pulpit and nominating committees may wish to develop realistic questions for candidates and their previous churches in order to uncover any hint of past abusive relationships or tendencies toward such. These questions will need to be sensitive to issues of slander and rights to privacy; however, the questionable conduct of a pastor should be accessible information, provided that information is factual and has been documented rather than being just gossip. Denominations should establish structures which would allow churches that have experienced an abusive leader to communicate relevant information to churches considering hiring that leader.<sup>19</sup>

Pastors have a unique role in counselling troubled congregants. They should be trained to pray and read Scriptures with their congregants, providing spiritual direction where needed, but they should not take on the role of therapists unless they have appropriate qualifications and accountability. When counselling does take place, locations should not be isolated (e.g., is the area accessible by other church staff?). Some pastors and lay leaders are increasingly questioning the practice of counselling members of the opposite sex (or same sex, if their temptations are in this area); in such cases, they may provide counselling in a supportive small-group setting or, better, train counsellors to take up same gender pastoral/counselling roles. Another option is to counsel as a couple and have both pastor and spouse trained in counselling.

For the protection of children in the church setting, children should never be left alone unsupervised. Wherever possible, they should also not be left alone with one care giver. When designing Christian education facilities, teaching rooms should be equipped with windows into the room from the hall either in the door or otherwise. Sunday school teachers, camp counsellors and other children's workers should be trained both so that they recognize abuse and so that they will not be inclined to abuse the children under their care. Those working with children should be aware of appropriate relationships with children. They should also be aware of resources in the community that children with difficulties can be directed.

Denominations and churches should also encourage educational opportunities dealing with abuse. These could include Sunday school curricula, materials for sermons, lists of resources, denominational conferences, etc. This will include time and financial provisions so leaders are able to attend.

#### *Healing a Wounded Congregation*

Abuse by church workers wounds the complainant, the abuser, their families and colleagues and it wounds the congregation as a whole. When a pastor or lay leader abuses his or her position of power, trust is broken not just with the victim, but with all those under his or her pastoral care.

In addition to having set policies in place to deal with the complainant, churches should give consideration as to how to

begin to carry out the healing process for all members of a congregation. The outcome of the complaint procedure may result in the loss of a trusted pastor, a friend, a respected spiritual leader. Regardless of how well the process is handled, there will be those in the congregation who will side with either the complainant or the respondent. Teaching on forgiveness, God's justice, and compassion is critical.

Congregational leaders seeking to deal with the repercussions of abuse may consider inviting known and respected pastors, perhaps those who have served the congregation in the past, to come for a series of healing sermons. There may be a professional in the congregation able to speak knowledgeably and calmly about issues of abuse. Christian education and youth leaders should be provided with resource people and teaching materials to deal with questions they may hear from children and young peoples. Elders and deacons should make themselves available to the members under their care to answer questions honestly, yet respecting the confidentiality of those involved.

While it is preferable to provide educational seminars and teaching opportunities about abuse before a crisis, such teaching will also be useful to churches recuperating from an abusive situation.

As appropriate, the congregation should endeavour to uphold formally the victim and the abuser in prayer. However, it is important to realize that, again, depending on the level of spiritual damage, this may not be welcome. The wisher of the parties involved should be respected, with ongoing prayer kept more private than public.

Finally, it is imperative that in the context of the church justice not only be done, but that it be seen to be done. We must remember that churches are more than buildings and programs, they are the very body of Christ. Damage to one member affects the rest of the body and impairs its ability to witness for Christ in the wider community. The way the church addresses with issues of abuse shapes the image it projects to society at large.

## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> “Report of the Committee to Study Physical, Emotional, and Sexual Abuse,” Agenda for Synod, 1992 (Christian Reformed Church in North America, 1992), p. 320.
- <sup>2</sup> “Family abuse: Abuse in the church - the untold story”, *Faith Today*, Sept./Oct. 1992, p. 18.
- <sup>3</sup> “How Common is Pastoral Indiscretion?”, *Leadership*, Winter 1988, Vol. IX, No. 1, at p.12-13.
- <sup>4</sup> *Criminal Code*, R.S.C. 1985, c. C-46, ss. 278 and 271.
- <sup>5</sup> *Criminal Code*, R.S.C. 1985, c. C-46, s. 265.
- <sup>6</sup> *Knoll v. Knoll*, [1970] 2 O.R. 169 at 176.
- <sup>7</sup> *Criminal Code*, R.S.C. 1985, c. C-46, ss 151,152,153,155.
- <sup>8</sup> *Criminal Code* s. 150.1.
- <sup>9</sup> *Criminal Code*, R.S.C. 1985, c. C-46, s. 43. See also *R. v. Dupperon* (1984), 43 C.R. (3rd) 70 (Sask. C.A.) at 77.
- <sup>10</sup> See for example *Ontario’s Child and Family Services Act*, RSO 1990, c. 11, s.72. This duty applies to teachers, social workers and clergy, among others.
- <sup>11</sup> Such matters as spiritual abuse, or the extreme types of abuse such as the psychological abuse administered by cults, or ritual abuse, while of great concern, are beyond the scope of this paper.
- <sup>12</sup> See Andre Bustanoby, “Counselling the Seductive Female”, *Leadership*, Winter 1988, Vol. IX, No. 1.
- <sup>13</sup> It is beyond the scope of this paper to deal with issues of corporal punishment of children. Suffice it to say that Christ tempered the law with love while affirming the principles behind the law. Physical discipline of children which leaves the child physically injured is a criminal act. Physical discipline of children without consideration of the responsibility of the parent to love the child is outside the biblical mandate.
- <sup>14</sup> “Honouring” does not preclude the possibility that children may have to confront their parents in instances of abuse.
- <sup>15</sup> See for example Eph. 4:2-6 and 1 Pet. 3:7.
- <sup>16</sup> If a pastor is a qualified counsellor, it is wise to avoid counselling a person of the opposite sex alone. Pastors are advised to counsel as couples or have another counsellor counsel an abuser or abused of the opposite sex. If a pastor has, at some point in his or her life been a victim of some form of abuse and has not dealt with it, he or she should not counsel either abusers or their victims.
- <sup>17</sup> See for example *Ontario’s Child and Family Services Act*, RSO 1985, s. 68. Check your province’s legislation.
- <sup>18</sup> In cases of physical or sexual assault, when it is appropriate in the context of the individuals and relationships. One must exercise discretion, however, as the criminal prosecution, once started, has a life of its own.
- <sup>19</sup> In the past, some pastors under a cloud of allegation have agreed to leave a church without dealing with the allegations on the condition that a positive recommendation is given when the pastor is a candidate at a future church. Given that abuse not dealt with is often repeated, there is a responsibility to pass on accurate information if requested. It is not appropriate to deny allegations.