

When a Predator Attacks

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Nothing can tear apart a church like an allegation of child sexual abuse by an adult with one of the children in your congregation. The pastor and church leaders are immediately faced with a spiritual crisis. What is the appropriate way to handle those involved? What is the potential fall-out beyond the trauma suffered by the child? While each situation is different, having a plan of action on how your congregation can handle child abuse allegations is a critical first step in the healing process for everyone involved.

It is estimated there are over 39 million adult child abuse survivors in the United States. This number continues to grow with approximately 500,000 children sexually abused each year. Child abuse can happen in your church. No congregation is immune from this tragic evil. The Apostle Peter reminds us to be on guard at all times: “Be shepherds of God’s flock that is under your care... Be self-controlled and alert. Your enemy the devil prowls like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour” (1 Peter 5:2,8). Does your congregation know how to respond after a predator has attacked? Here are five best practices that can help guide your congregation through these types of turbulent situations.

Finding Healing Following Child Sexual Abuse Incidents

1. Acknowledge Child Abuse

Church leaders and members must be willing to acknowledge that it can happen. We live in a sinful world. This is why it is critical for your congregation to have an established written child protection plan in place to protect children from harm. Adults must be educated on how to appropriately interact with children and how to recognize the warning signs of child abuse before an incident occurs.

2. Report Abuse and Cooperate

It is critical for church leaders to understand the child protection **reporting laws** in your jurisdiction. When allegations and incidents of child abuse arise, they must be reported immediately to law enforcement authorities. It is not the congregation’s responsibility to investigate the child’s claim. This will be done by law enforcement and trained professionals. It is appropriate to fully cooperate and not obstruct the investigation. It is also very important that local conference administration is notified immediately of the situation. They must make the appropriate notifications to their insurance company and legal counsel.

3. Misdirected Empathy

It is very difficult for church members to accept the possibility that a trusted adult, who they personally know, could ever harm a child. For some, it can be even more inconceivable that the abuse comes from within the congregation. Remember, in many incidents there is truth in these allegations. The accused adult should immediately be relieved of his/her church duties until a full investigation can be completed. Some members may be tempted to take sides or attempt to shield the adult by obscuring the truth in order to protect the person’s or church’s reputation. This can often cause more harm to all parties involved. It is better to take action and find out the truth to protect everyone’s reputation and prevent further incidents. Remember, your first responsibility is to protect the victim from further harm.

4. Healing Within

During these challenging times, the pastor must take an active role in being the shepherd of the congregation. Families on both sides have been placed in turmoil and they need pastoral care and spiritual guidance. This is not the time to be judgmental or to take sides. The congregation will need reassurance that the Lord is still in control and He will provide guidance to lead them through the challenges ahead.

5. Never Risk a Second Chance

“Persons who have violated their sacred trust should not be placed in a position that will give them access again to children,” said the late James Cress, former ministerial director for the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists. “Some advocate mercy for those who violate children, and of course, forgiveness is available to any sinner. Scripture, however, advocates mercy for their victims and protection for those who would become their victims should they be loosed to prey again upon the innocent.” Our first duty must always be to guard our children from harm.

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