

Sample Safe Church Training Outline for Councils and Ministry Leaders

Adapted, with much gratitude, from Sarah Cook's outline for training at Calvary CRC in Ottawa, ON

Rationale for Safe Church Training for Council Members and Ministry Leaders:

Safe Church Ministry recommends that all CRC office bearers, in addition to undergoing a criminal background check, also receive training in abuse awareness, prevention, and response. This safe church training will help to change the culture of denial and silence surrounding abuse, a culture which allows abuse to thrive. The training is designed to help council members and other ministry leaders acknowledge that abuse exists and has impacts in our congregations. It will also equip them to better recognize abuse and respond more effectively, as well as to consider strategies for prevention. By offering and participating in this training, we are working to create a safer community for all people - one that respects the value of each person and provides a nurturing environment for faith to grow.

Each CRC council will determine when and how often office bearers will be required to receive safe church training. Ideally, all new office bearers and ministry leaders will participate in this initial 3-hour safe church training, with opportunities offered at other times for refresher training or additional training on related topics.

Materials Needed for this Training:

- a. A copy of the safe church/abuse prevention policy
- b. A copy of *Safe Church Ministry: A Church Leader's Role* (given to each participant at the beginning of the session with the invitation to add notes during the workshop)
- c. Three Handouts: 1) Where's the Boundary?/A Word about Power 2) Responding to a Child who Discloses/Signs and Symptoms 3) Advisory Panel Process Flow Chart
- d. Scenarios with discussion questions
- e. Refreshments for a break
- f. A white board, chalk board, or flip chart/easel for recording responses (optional)

Sample Agenda for this Training:

9:00-9:30am – Welcome, Introduction, and Vision

9:30-10:30 – The Harm Done in Abuse and the Nature of Offending

10:30-10:45 – Break

10:45-11:30 – Scenarios and Discussion

11:30-12 Noon – Overview of Safe Church Policy

(Or, the agenda may be divided in half at the break and be held in two separate sessions)

Welcome and Introduction:

Since we only have a short time together, we will only be able to skim the surface today. This training is designed to help build awareness about some of the indicators of abuse, to identify the harm done and needs of the one who has suffered abuse, as well as the needs of the one who has perpetrated abuse. We will also look at how abuse impacts our faith community, and consider how we might diminish the risks and create a safer environment for everyone.

(Tip for discussion questions: Don't be too quick to fill the silence; give people time to reflect and share answers before you speak. Use of a white board or chalk board to record answers may be helpful but is not required)

Discussion Question #1: *What do you think of when you hear the word “abuse”? What is abuse?*

Note: Point out *Safe Church Ministry: A Church Leader’s Role* (see p. 6) Abuse has many faces; it includes child sexual abuse, domestic abuse, and sexual assault. It also includes emotional, physical, and spiritual abuse. One thing that all abuse has in common is the misuse of power. In abuse, power is used to harm, to control, or for selfish gain. It’s the opposite of Jesus, who used his power in loving service to others. We have to understand that office bearers and ministry leaders have been given authority, and there is power that goes along with that. It’s a sacred trust; betraying that trust and misusing that authority can have devastating consequences. Today we will not focus on a certain legal definition for abuse, but will focus on abuse as misuse of authority, the authority that’s been given to office bearers and ministry leaders. (Handout: Where’s the Boundary? – something for them to refer to later)

Vision for a safe church:

Discussion Question #2: *When you think of a “safe church”, what comes to your mind? What are characteristics that would describe a “safe church”?*

Note: Our congregation is a body of forgiven sinners. It’s not perfect. We are fallen and live in a fallen world. Therefore, it may be impossible to guarantee that our church will be safe for everyone. Nevertheless, it is our responsibility to do all that we can to provide an environment where everyone is valued and faith can be nurtured and grow. By reducing the risks, we create safer churches.

Note the following characteristics, especially if they do not come up in the discussion:
In a safe church...

- People are realistic – we know that the congregation is likely to include people who are struggling with abuse in some way, even though it remains hidden
- People are seen in God’s image and respect and value each other; love, respect, dignity & justice for all is promoted at all levels
- People are educated in matters dealing with abuse (leaders, parents, teachers, and children)
- There is a strategy and protocol about how to deal with abuse when it arises:
 - Allegations are taken seriously and persons in authority respond effectively.
 - There’s accountability for those who abuse.
 - There is a willingness to walk alongside those who are hurting and provide pastoral care, a listening ear.
 - Those victimized don’t experience blame and shame, but rather compassion and understanding.
 - Steps have been taken to prevent abuse, to protect the vulnerable.

This is the kind of congregation we strive for, and it’s up to the office bearers and ministry leaders to create and maintain this kind of covenant community.

Discussion Question #3: *What are some of the reasons for office bearers and church ministry leaders in particular to be trained about abuse? Why is this subject especially applicable to office bearers and ministry leaders?*

Note the following, especially if it does not come up in discussion:

Office bearers and ministry leaders must be concerned about abuse because...

- Church leaders oversee what happens in the congregation and are given authority to respond on behalf of the congregation. Church leaders are in a trusted position and if

they are ineffective, negligent, or engage in misconduct, the office itself is discredited. Trust is betrayed. The name of our Lord is dishonored.

- Church leaders may face personal legal liability in addition to liability faced by the congregation as an organization. This is why training is often required by insurance carriers.
- Church leaders are responsible for the well-being of children and youth who are part of the covenant family, and who are vulnerable and need protection. Church leaders who interact with children and youth may be the first to encounter situations of abuse.
- Abuse deeply impacts individuals, their families, and the entire community. We are one body in Christ and must show concern for each member. When one part hurts, it hurts the whole; the entire body is dysfunctional. There are spiritual effects as well, inhibiting spiritual life, health, and growth.

The Harm Done in Abuse:

(Optional "Common Ground" Circle Sharing Exercise – Have the group form a circle; step into the middle of the circle; ask for a show of hands from those who know someone, a friend or family member who has experienced abuse; have them think about how the abuse affected that person, what were the impacts in that person's life?; invite anyone who would like to briefly share those impacts to join you in the circle; share those brief stories (no names or abuse specifics, but the impact of the abuse). "This space is holy ground. All those around the circle bear witness to the fact that abuse has harmed our friends, family members, and loved ones."; depending on what was shared and the emotion involved, allow for time to take a few deep breaths and check in to make sure people are ready to move on.)

Discussion Question #4: What is the harm done in abuse? (This will be done in parts)
(May refer to pp. 6-9 in *Safe Church Ministry: A Church Leader's Role*)

What is the harm to the one who has been victimized by abuse?

Note the following, especially if it does not come up in discussion:

- Feelings of intense shame and guilt
- An inability to trust, to give or receive love, or to enter into healthy relationships
- Clinically serious emotional, physical, and psychological symptoms
- A faith crisis, feeling abandoned by God

What is the harm to the one who has chosen to perpetrate abuse?

Note the following, especially if it does not come up in discussion:

- May deny or minimize harm and not be able to experience empathy for others
- Patterns of thinking and behaving are damaging – overcoming is a long difficult process
- Loss of opportunities to serve in leadership roles – long-term accountability is needed
- Quick forgiveness by others is not helpful!

What is the harm to the congregation and its mission as an organization when abuse occurs or when we allow it to continue? What harm comes to the community?

Note the following, especially if it does not come up in discussion:

- Relationships do not reflect God's design for his church – we do not honor our Lord.
- There is a perceived need to hide or cover up the presence of abuse within Christian homes or relationships – We do not act with integrity
- An alliance with one side or the other can cause conflict and division in the church – Unity in Christ is broken

- The road toward healing is long and complicated, requiring time, energy, money, etc. It can be a burdensome process, leaving little energy for other ministry

Break:

Scenarios / Situations – (See separate document for Scenarios)

You may divide the group into small groups (according to their leadership roles, or randomly). Each group is given a scenario with questions to discuss. Choose scenarios that you feel most confident presenting, or those which impact your congregation most directly. If additional scenarios are desired, please contact Safe Church Ministry (additional scenarios are available). After a few minutes, each group shares with the larger group what they discussed and decided.

Responding to Abuse: (Handout: Responding to a child who discloses/signs and symptoms)

- **Children:** Always report to authorities in cases of sexual or physical abuse or neglect. Refer to handout about responding to disclosure and signs and symptoms of abuse.
- **Adults:** Note guidelines for the Advisory Panel Process – Approved by Synod 2010, full document available on website (Handout: APP flow chart)
 - Only used in situations of physical or sexual abuse by a CRC church leader – provides a more neutral place for dealing with allegations (panel is not connected with congregation)
 - Claimant must be an adult, but abuse may have occurred when claimant was still a minor (claimant need not be a CRC member)
 - Safe church panel hears first from the claimant and determines whether or not the allegation is serious and probable (more likely than not to have occurred)
 - Once that determination is made, the safe church panel then hears from the accused
 - A report is written and given to the church council to take action
 - Appeals are allowed by either party if action taken is not satisfactory
 - Pastoral care is needed for all parties and for the congregation

Preventing Abuse:

“An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure”. Preventing abuse before it happens is the best strategy. Prevention strategies include but are not limited to:

- Training and educational opportunities for church leaders and for the congregation so that abuse is more easily recognized
- A safe church/abuse prevention committee to oversee prevention efforts such as policy, facility design, etc.
- Age-appropriate prevention education for children and youth – Safe Church Ministry recommends *Circle of Grace*
- Access to and use of community resources, counseling services, movements involved in similar work to end abuse, resources from the denomination and Safe Church Ministry, etc.

Policy Review:

Policy is the number one prevention tool available to churches. Review the current safe church/abuse prevention policy, highlighting key points.