

Recommendations for Communities of Faith:

Providing a Victim-Centered Response to the Problems of Child Sexual Abuse by Clergy

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1. Upon disclosure of child sexual abuse by clergy, provide all victims/guardians with information about secular rape crisis center services in the local community (or other localities per request of victims). Information should be relayed both verbally and in writing, via rape crisis center brochures/pamphlets/etc. Information should include rape crisis center contact information; specific services offered; and the confidential, client-centered, and empowering nature of such services.

In the aftermath of sexual violence, victims may feel overwhelmed and traumatized, not knowing where to turn, how to begin, or who to trust. Many sexual assault victims experience short- and long-term effects, including but not limited to the following: post traumatic stress disorder, sleep disorders, eating disorders, suicidal ideation/attempts, dysfunctional relationships, disruption of education/employment, fear, depression, anxiety, diminished trust, isolation, lowered self-esteem, and self-blame. For victims of clergy sexual abuse, these short- and long-term effects may be compounded by the reality that the source of their pain is a representative of God—someone who can “do no wrong.”

It may prove difficult, if not impossible, for victims to distinguish between the safety and support they may have felt and *still feel* within their faith community and the fear, anxiety, and isolation they may now feel as a result of the sexual assault. Therefore, to victims of clergy sexual assault, the faith community may not feel like a safe place to turn for counseling, advocacy, and support.

Clergy members *also* struggle with the reality of clergy sexual assaults; such assaults threaten the cornerstones of congregations. To ask clergy members to look beyond their own pain, shock, and needs related to clergy sexual assault so that they can provide effective and objective support for victims is unfair to both clergy members and victims; to do so does everyone a great disservice.

Rape crisis center counselors and advocates, whose communications with victims are protected by statute, provide victims with safe, supportive, neutral, anonymous, and nonjudgmental counseling and advocacy services, with the guarantee of confidentiality in Pennsylvania law outside of the faith community. Services include one-on-one short- and long-term counseling, advocacy, and support groups. Rape crisis centers are a resource for faith communities as well. Because the centers are not involved in pending

investigations or responsible for the alleged perpetrator in any way, they are able to focus solely on supporting the victim and helping him/her navigate systems.

The faith community has a significant role to play in supporting and assisting victims in the aftermath of victimization; however, it should not present itself as the only option available. By doing so, the faith community further isolates the victim and diminishes his/her power to make choices and navigate the course of recovery.

2. Immediately report any suspected incidents of child sexual abuse to law enforcement and child protective services. In the event of an internal investigation in order to administer ecclesiastical accountability, cooperate fully with law enforcement, and release all investigative documents, so that the alleged perpetrator may also be held legally accountable.

Law enforcement and child protective services are considered experts in the field of sexual assault investigation. Law enforcement officers and social service agents are specifically trained in the most advanced and current interviewing, evidence collection, and investigation techniques. Investigating officers and agents are equipped—via funding, personnel, training, technology, office space, and equipment—to conduct unbiased, thorough, precise, and accurate investigations. Investigation protocols help to ensure that evidence is collected and preserved, that the process is objective and precise, and that victims are not revictimized.

At present, the method of investigation conducted by some faith communities poses a conflict of interest for victims, clergy, and the community as a whole. Clergy members are put in an impossible position when charged with conducting an investigation that involves victims and perpetrators they may know, coupled with their own deeply rooted, though perhaps subconscious, desire to protect an institution in which they work and worship. They cannot be expected to be objective or effective. During an internal investigation, victims' words and stories may be questioned, dissected, and deemed not credible. Victims may be revictimized by the very institution from which they seek support, faith, and trust. Faith communities are divided and burdened by the internal investigation process that taxes the energy, spirit, and relationships of their members.

The internal investigation process is inherently biased. By reporting all reports of sexual abuse, the faith community takes itself out of the impossible role of investigator, thereby placing the matter in the hands of experts and liberating itself to attend to its congregation. Turning over all reports of sexual abuse will ensure that the insular response of the faith communities is abolished.

3. Voluntarily produce the alleged perpetrator and all requested documents to investigating and prosecuting agencies.

To many, faith communities are equated with honesty, openness, and generosity. It takes much courage for victims of sexual assault to come forward and give voice to their victimizations. By refusing to release documents to investigators, faith communities send victims and congregations throughout the world a very clear message: the reputations of perpetrators and the faith community are more important than justice and the well-being of victims. In cooperating with investigating and prosecuting agencies, faith communities send a message more congruent with its religious tenets.

4. Institute a zero-tolerance policy for sexual abuse by clergy and faith community employees whereby the alleged perpetrator is immediately removed from access to the victim and/or other potential victims upon the report of sexual abuse.

The immediate removal of an alleged perpetrator ensures the safety not only of the victim, but of potential *future* victims. A zero-tolerance policy validates the victim's experience and acknowledges the seriousness of the offense. This action does not in any way prevent the faith community from addressing the needs of the alleged perpetrator. Alleged perpetrators should be provided access to reputable offender management programs. The removal of the alleged perpetrator demonstrates the faith community's role in facilitating the treatment and care of offenders while ensuring the safety of victims. An alleged perpetrator should never be allowed to move to another congregation without full disclosure of the allegations to the new community.

5. Eliminate the practice of offering a financial settlement to victims or their families in exchange for their silence.

Child abusers use secrecy as a weapon. It is in silence that child sexual abuse occurs and is perpetuated. To offer victims a financial settlement *in exchange for* their continued secrecy exacerbates the burden a victim of clergy sexual abuse may already shoulder. Involving the victim in a conspiracy of silence recreates a portion of the original victimization. This bartering of restitution in exchange for silence is an anathema to the healing process. Rather, the victim should be empowered to choose the method and degree of disclosure about the abuse.

6. Compensate victims for the trauma of sexual abuse.

Faith communities should provide financial reimbursement for expenses related to the victimization and should also refer the victim to the Pennsylvania Crime Victims Compensation program. Faith communities should voluntarily reimburse the Crime Victims Compensation program for any expenses paid out in relation to cases resulting from clergy sexual abuse. Financial compensation—although it can not fully repay a victim for the cost of sexual assault—should cover expenses related to both short- and long-term effects of sexual violence. Post-abuse suffering related to lost work, disrupted education, mental health counseling, legal and medical bills, alcohol/drug treatment, and other costs should be considered in determining compensation figures.

7. Public announcement should be made within and outside of the faith community regarding the arrest of any clergy or faith community employee. Following such an announcement, interventions should be provided to assist the congregation, non-offending clergy members and faith community employees through the crisis.

Faith communities should announce the arrest of any employee on charges of sexual abuse to their congregations. Special attention should be given to ensure that those faith communities, schools, and residences where the abuse occurred and/or where others might have been victimized are notified of the arrest. To the extent possible, communities should also notify other communities of faith of known perpetrators to reduce future victimizations in other communities throughout the community and nation.

Statistics on sexual assault in the United States indicate that one in six boys and one in four girls will experience sexual assault. In any congregation, the likelihood of there being other victims is great. By announcing the arrest of alleged perpetrators for child sexual assault, the Church demonstrates public accountability to its members and also provides an opportunity for other silent victims to come forward.

Immediately following such an announcement, the faith community should be prepared to address the victimization of the congregation and the needs of its members. To those ends, the faith community should reach out to local rape crisis centers for guidance and services. Advocates and counselors from rape crisis centers can offer faith communities free, confidential individual and group counseling, advocacy, education, and support.

To fully support the victim after the public announcement, faith communities should be available to assist the victim, including referring the victim to other faith communities as needed to meet the continuing spiritual needs of the victim.

8. Abolish the practice of allowing lawyers to subpoena the victim's therapy records. The faith community, the accused perpetrator, or their agents should not be allowed to sue their accusers.

When faith communities, through their attorneys, attempt to secure the private counseling records of a victim who has been sexually assaulted by a clergy member, it intentionally revictimizes the victim. This violation of a victim's privacy mirrors the perpetrator's assault and invasion into his/her trust, emotions, and mental health and damages the therapeutic relationship between the victim and his or her therapist during a critical healing time. The subpoenaing of therapy records is a severe backlash against the victim and his/her efforts to seek justice in the civil arena.

9. Appoint victims of clergy sexual abuse and their advocates to boards or other advisory committees that may influence faith communities' policies, procedures and programs around sexual abuse.

The victim's voice is the most important: this is the only voice that can truly communicate the horror of sexual abuse and the effects that faith community's policies and procedures have on victims. Collectively, victims' voices have shaped rape crisis advocacy and services over the last 27 years. Victims and advocates must be part of the decisions that will impact victims and the services they need and utilize. The Pennsylvania Coalition Against Rape (PCAR) is the leading state coalition in the nation. PCAR can provide curricula, training, technical assistance, research, and other resources to assist faith communities' boards or other advisory committees in addressing the issue of sexual assault. PCAR can assist local, state and national faith organizations in crafting proactive screening policies and prevention education programs.

10. Foster and support partnerships among PCAR and local crisis centers with state, local, and national-level religious organizations so that leaders in both anti-sexual violence and faith communities build relationships and work collaboratively to prevent and address sexual violence in communities of faith.

Because faith can be such an integral component of surviving a sexual assault and sexual assault can test one's faith, the collaboration between communities of faith and PCAR is logical and much needed. PCAR's long history of developing and delivering prevention education programs to communities in Pennsylvania has helped to protect children from sexual abuse, raised public awareness about sexual assault prevalence and costs, and equipped communities with tools to prevent and address the problem of sexual assault. By providing sexual abuse prevention education programs to leaders in faith communities at the state level, the hope is that such leaders will bring knowledge and skills back to their individual communities and influence policies, procedures, and programs in ways that will prevent future and address existing clergy sexual abuse.

11. Faith community leaders should partner with victim organizations such as the Survivors Network of those Abused by Priests (SNAP) and similar organizations to advocate for legislative remedies that will prevent future victimization and improve response to past victimization.

To demonstrate its commitment to supporting the full healing of victims, faith communities should advocate for extending or eliminating the statute of limitations in child sexual abuse cases. As there is no “statute of limitations” on a victim’s suffering, there should be no statute of limitations on coming forward and seeking justice for a sexual assault that occurred in childhood. Many victims do not report their victimization for many years because they *cannot*; they may be paralyzed by shame or fear. The healing process knows no time limit. Victims cannot, and should not be put on a timeline that suits faith communities and courts. Rather, victims should be able to focus on healing and growing and coming forward when they are ready. They should have the opportunity to report the crime with the possibility of full criminal prosecution of the offender, regardless of how long ago the crime occurred.

12. In partnership with anti-rape advocacy organizations, faith communities should develop proactive policies and procedures to address the issue of child sexual abuse by clergy.

Policies and procedures should include a process for screening all clergy and other personnel who interact with children during sponsored activities. They should also include prevention education. Victim-centered policies for responding to sexual abuse disclosures and allegations should be created. Faith communities can contact the National Sexual Violence Resource Center for model policies and programs.

*Please note that these recommendations are for *Child* sexual abuse by clergy cases. PCAR hopes to issue a separate recommendation for clergy sexual misconduct with adult victims, due to the different dynamics and legal issues involved.