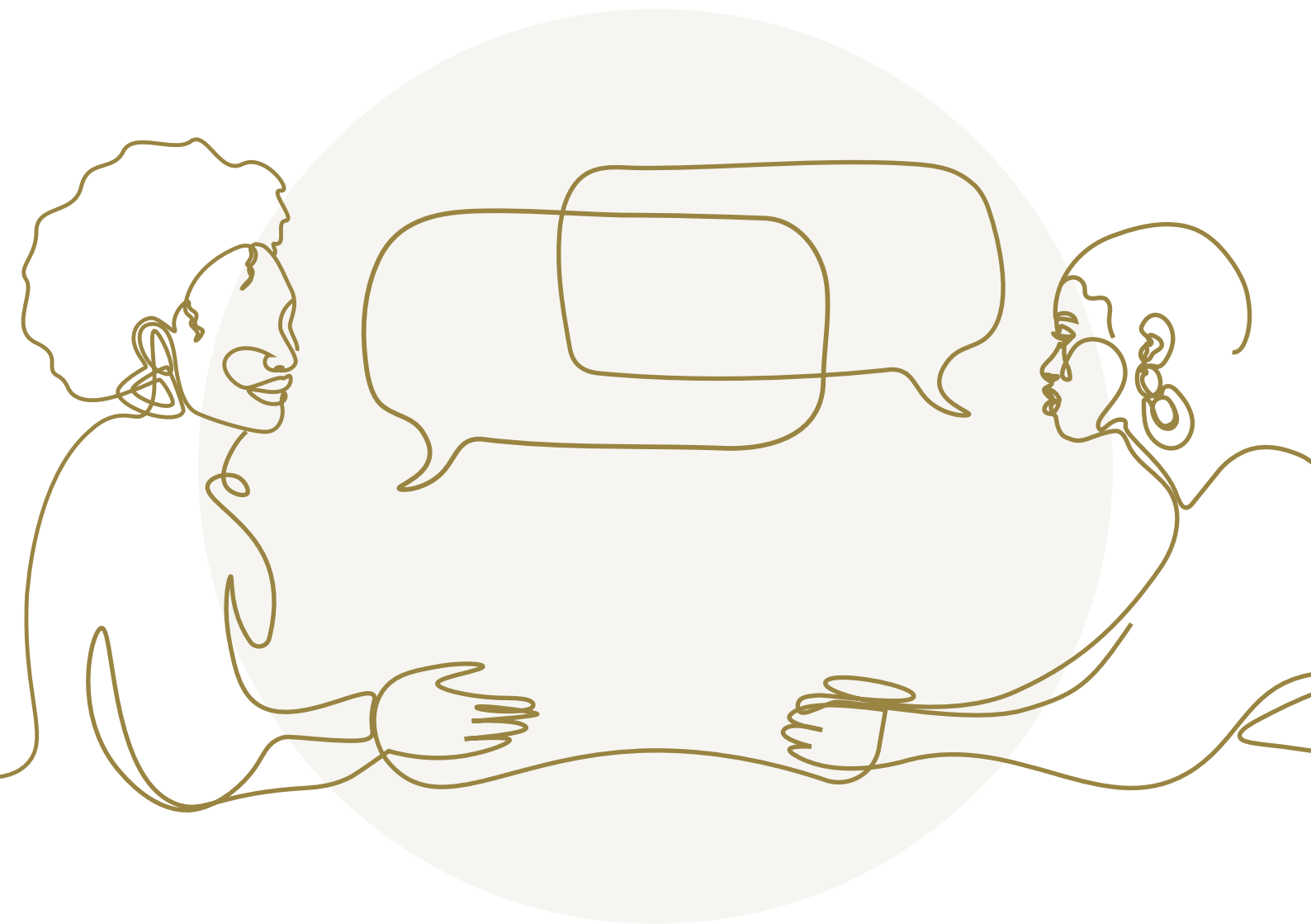


Safe Church:

Responding well when abuse
is disclosed or reported



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Responding well when abuse is disclosed or reported

For someone who has been abused, getting ready to tell another person about the abuse is often a difficult process. It may take a long time. In this document, when we use the term **disclose** we mean telling another person about the abuse; sharing the story of what happened.

A disclosure is different to **reporting** abuse to a person or institution with the authority and power to take further action. When someone **reports** abuse, they do so in the hope that action will be taken, that the perpetrator will be held accountable, others will be kept safe and that there will be a just outcome. Someone who discloses may go on to make a formal report of the abuse.

Within the church it is important that

- a. We listen well and respond with respect and compassion if someone **discloses** abuse, and know what steps to take next; and
- b. When someone wishes to **report** abuse, the person who receives that report also

listens well and responds with respect and compassion, and then takes action to ensure that the report is taken seriously, investigated carefully and managed effectively by people who are equipped to do so.

In this document we will cover how to respond when someone **discloses** abuse, and what steps to follow if someone wishes to **report** abuse. Someone may **disclose** abuse to anyone in the church community and so everyone should be equipped to respond well to a disclosure.

However, the church also needs to appoint a particular person (or people) who will be trained and equipped to receive **reports** of abuse and take appropriate action. This needs to be someone who is trusted and respected in the church community. The church community needs to be told who the person, or persons, are that have been appointed.

How to respond well when a person discloses or reports abuse

How a listener responds when someone discloses or reports abuse will have an impact on the process of healing. The listener's response could help and support the person's healing journey, or it could cause further harm. You can offer compassionate listening

and support without professional qualifications. When a person chooses to disclose abuse, in that moment they need to be listened to with full attention, taken seriously and to have both their experience and their feelings acknowledged.

1 Listen well

- The most important response when someone either discloses or reports abuse is to give them time and your full attention, and to really listen. Allow them to tell the story at their own pace and to share what they are comfortable sharing.
- It is normal for a story about a trauma to seem a bit confused or scattered. Give the person time and try to follow. The situation they are describing may also be complex. It may not be clear immediately exactly what has happened. Keep an open mind as you listen and encourage the person to tell the story as fully as they are able.
- If the person is disclosing the abuse, keep questions to a minimum – only to check that you have heard and understood correctly.
- If the person is reporting the abuse, ask them if they are comfortable with you writing notes as they speak to help you keep track of what they are sharing. Place the paper in such a way that they can see what you are writing. Write only the facts they share in their own words. Ask questions to clarify and to ensure that you are recording their story accurately.
- Try to use the words that the person uses, both for the abuse that took place and for the person who perpetrated the abuse (for example, if someone who was raped is calling it ‘the incident’, you should also talk about ‘the incident’ rather than saying ‘when you were raped’).
- Stay calm and steady in your responses. You may be shocked or upset and struggling to take in what they are telling you, but your focus must remain on the person disclosing abuse and their story, not your own reaction.
- As the person receiving the disclosure or report, it is not your place to decide whether or not the story is ‘true’ or ‘credible’. Do not question or challenge the story e.g. “Did that really happen?” or “I just can’t believe that person would do such a thing”. A reaction like this will hurt the person who is disclosing or reporting and will break down trust.
- Acknowledge the story you have heard and validate the feelings that have been expressed.
- Assure them that the abuse was not their fault and that you take what they have shared very seriously. Ask them how they are feeling, having told you about what happened to them.
- Don’t make promises you cannot keep, such as that you will keep the disclosure a secret. You can, and must however, keep the person’s story confidential. This means that you do not tell anyone what has been shared with you unless you are required to tell them, according to your policies or laws. Who you need to tell depends on a few factors such as: Is the person who has been abused an adult or a child? Is there any risk that someone might be harmed (again) or harm themselves? Is the person wanting to report the abuse (lodge a formal complaint)? In each case, explain who you will need to tell, what you will need to tell them, and why.
- Ensure you have the correct name and contact details for the person disclosing or reporting abuse, so that you can contact them afterwards.

2 Focus on safety first

The immediate safety of the person who has been abused has to be your first priority. Any action you take needs to be guided by the following question:

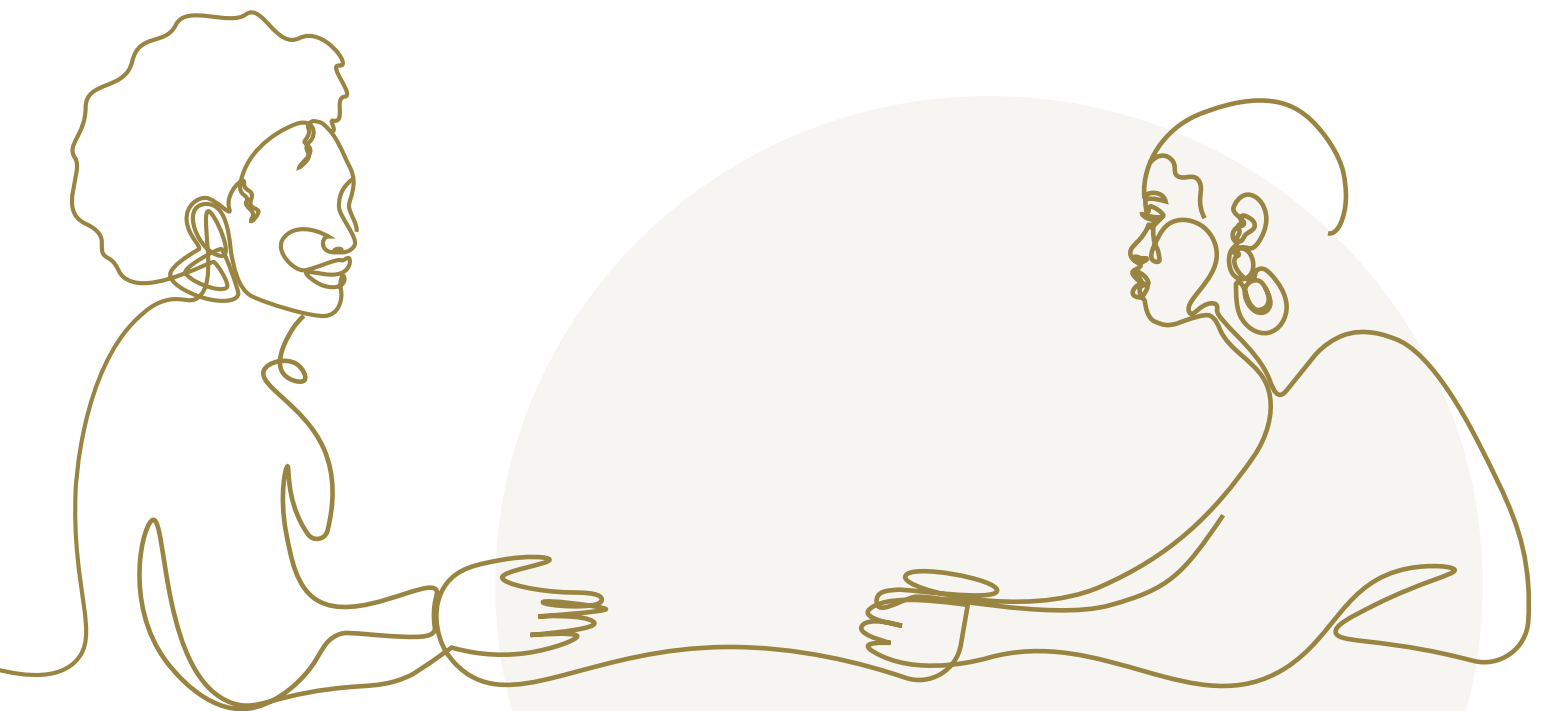
Is the person who has been abused at risk of harm now?

Disclosing or reporting abuse can increase a person's risk of further harm. They may be threatened, manipulated or physically harmed if the abuser finds out. It may be necessary to organise safe accommodation (shelter), or to develop a plan or strategy to ensure that they are protected as far as possible from the abuser and the abuser's supporters.

You could ask:

- a. *If they are with you:* Will you be safe when you leave here?
- b. *If they are calling:* Are you currently somewhere that you feel safe? May I stay on the phone with you until you are somewhere that you feel safer?
- c. *If the person has messaged or emailed you:* Do you want me to call you? What is the best number to reach you at? Is now a good time to call?
- d. What can I do to help you be/stay safe?

If the person is in immediate danger, work with them to get them to safety. This could include contacting the police or an agency offering shelter and support.



3 Consider Medical attention

If the abuse was physical or sexual, particularly if it was recent, the person disclosing or reporting may need medical attention. Suggest this and provide information about available services.

It is up to the person who has been abused if and when they want to seek medical attention (if they are an adult). The person may have complicated feelings about seeking medical attention. You can support them as they think it through and decide.

Medical considerations in the case of sexual violation

The person disclosing sexual abuse may want to seek medical attention for the following:

- Physical injuries (external and/or internal)
- Pregnancy (testing, emergency contraception up to five days after the assault, counselling regarding pregnancy options)
- Tests and treatments for Sexually Transmitted Infections (STIs)
- HIV testing (and emergency prophylaxis if the abuse occurred less than 72 hours before)



4 Next steps if the person being abused is a child or an adult with a disability which limits decision-making capacity

The next steps that you take will depend on whether the person who is being or has been abused is a child or an adult, and whether or not they have a disability which limits their decision-making ability. If the person who experienced the abuse is an adult the next steps depend on whether the person is only disclosing the abuse to someone they trust or making a formal report to someone that they hope will take action.

If the person who has been or is being abused is a child immediate action *must* be taken. The best interests of the child are always the most important consideration when deciding what action to take.

The laws in your country may also guide you in taking action. You will need to check your country's legal requirements for reporting abuse of children. Most countries have laws in place which require that you report known or suspected abuse of a child to a social service agency, a government department or the police. For this reason, you should never promise a child to keep what you have been told a secret. Explain to the child that you will only tell people who can help them to be safe and protected from further harm.

If the child's parents are not the perpetrators of the abuse, they should be involved as soon as possible, and supported to respond to their child in ways that are helpful such as not interrogating or blaming, but believing their child.

In some contexts state services are either not available or not trusted by the community to act in the best interests of the person who has been abused. If this is the case, seek the advice of a professional (social worker, psychologist, medical doctor or similar) that you do trust. Never keep the information to yourself or try to intervene in the situation on your own.

If the person who is/was being abused is an adult who has a disability which limits their capacity to make choices for themselves such as an intellectual disability, a serious psychological illness, or another reason, the action you take will need to be determined by the laws in your country governing the care of people with disabilities, in consultation with those who are responsible for the person's care (as long as this does not include the alleged abuser). Explain to the person disclosing that you will only tell people who may be able to help them to be protected from further harm.



5 Next steps when an adult is disclosing abuse

If the person who is/was being abused is an adult with the capacity to make decisions about their own wellbeing their wishes need to determine the next steps taken.

If the adult is simply **disclosing the abuse**, then once you have heard the full story, and have addressed concerns about safety and physical wellness, ask the person what further action *they* would like to take and what outcome *they* are hoping for. They may not know right away what they need or want to do next. It may take time, and a number of conversations before they feel ready to take any further steps. And they may never want to take any further action other than simply telling their story.

5.1 Offer choices

- If an adult simply wanted to tell their story and *wants no further action to be taken*, then acknowledge and validate their story. Talk about their what helps them to cope and what sustains them – these may be people, beliefs or things that they do. Ask if the church may keep a confidential record of their story in case further disclosures are made about the same alleged abuser.

If the person does not want any action taken in relation to the abuse they have experienced, you will still need to consider what steps need to be taken or measures put in place to protect the church community if there is any chance that the alleged abuser has abused others, is abusing others or could attempt to abuse others.

- *If the person disclosing the abuse is considering reporting abuse*, which could include *lodging a formal complaint*, explain the possible courses of action that are available to them within your particular diocese or province and what each would involve. Explain who would need to be informed and what actions would need to be taken.

This is one reason why a policy and procedures are so important. The policy needs to describe the steps to be taken in the process of handling a report of abuse and can be shared with the person wanting to lodge a complaint. This information will allow them to make an informed decision.

- If the person is not (yet) open to reporting or lodging a complaint, offer ongoing pastoral care and support.



- If the person wishes to (re-)connect in some way with the church community via a support group (if available), a Bible study group or involvement in one of the ministries in the church, it may be necessary to carefully facilitate this. If the person has reported to lodge formal complaint against a church worker, sensitivity and care will be needed to ensure that the community is supportive of the victim and does not cause further harm or distress through their responses. However, the person might very well want no further contact with the church if the abuser was a church worker or leader. Respect the person's choices.
- A person who has experienced abuse may need help beyond the care that the church can provide, such as professional care or victim support services. Connect/refer them to service providers if this is what they need and want. You could also help the person identify and connect with other support persons in their community, school, family or friendship circles.

Having provided relevant information, once again ask the person disclosing abuse how they would like to proceed. You may need to meet several times to review the options. Ask them if you can check in with them to see how they are doing in between meetings. Assure them that they won't be alone whatever their choice and that someone can accompany and support them throughout whatever process follows. Ask them how they would like to be supported.

If it becomes clear that you aren't the right person to support the person or to help them take their disclosure forward because you don't have the necessary knowledge, skills or experience, be honest about this but offer to go with them to see someone who can help them.

6 Next steps when an adult is reporting abuse

e. Inform

- Tell the person who is reporting the abuse, what will happen next. Explain the steps that the church/diocese follows when abuse is reported.
- Explain who you will need to inform about the abuse (usually the Safeguarding/Safe Church Lead for the diocese/province), when you will need to tell them and why (e.g. because that person is equipped to manage situations where abuse has occurred in a fair and compassionate way). You can promise to tell only the person(s) who need to know in order to provide the person who has experienced abuse with the care and guidance they need as they take further action.

f. Take prompt action

- Inform the appropriate person(s) in your diocese or province about the disclosure and ensure that the appropriate steps are taken so that the person who reported the abuse is safe and supported. Tell only those who have to know. Do not try to confront the alleged abuser.

- As soon as possible and certainly within 24 hours write down what you have been told, using the person's exact words, if possible, and any notes that you took during the meeting. Sign and date this report.
- Submit the report as soon as you are able to the appropriate person for further investigation (according to your policy). The process for this person to follow when a report of abuse is received is covered in *Dealing with Allegations of Abuse*.

g. Determine if what has been reported is a crime in your country

- If it is, does the person want to bring a criminal charge against the alleged abuser? Involve the relevant authorities as soon as possible if this is the case.

In summary, when responding to any person who discloses or reports abuse by a church worker or church leader, the church must prioritise the needs of the person who has been abused, treating them with dignity and offering compassionate care, safety and prompt action.

Self-care for those who are receiving disclosures and reports

If you are listening to disclosures or reports about abuse, it will affect you. This is normal and to be expected. You may not notice the effects at first, but they add up. It's important to monitor your own responses over time. Note any sustained increase in anxiety, irritability, sadness or withdrawal. You may also notice that you have flattened emotional responses and start feeling numb. These are signs that you need to take care of yourself.

Some of the ways to manage the impact of listening to peoples' experiences of trauma are:

- **Finding someone to talk to.** Ideally this should be a professional person who can offer supervision or guidance, as well as maintaining confidentiality. If this is not possible, find a wise and trusted colleague or friend, who listens well. Tell them about how you are feeling but don't tell them the details of the stories you have heard.
- **Doing things that help you to release tension and bring you greater joy or peace.** This could include things like physical exercise, prayerful meditation, listening to or making music, playing a game, chatting to friends, doing something creative, or writing down your thoughts and feelings.
- **Developing an end of day ritual** where you prayerfully release the stories that have been shared with you and the people you are concerned about into God's care.
- **Avoiding the use of substances** such as alcohol to help you relax.





There are other resources to help you as you continue your work on the Safe Church Commission website www.anglicancommunion.org/scc

Please contact the Safe Church Commission at scc@anglicancommunion.org if you have suggestions, questions or would like to have a conversation about the Safe Church work you are doing.

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