

Caring for the Community

1. Caring for the Congregation

Incidents of child abuse, and the secrecy that often surrounds them, can cause devastating harm to the church as well as to the survivors. Therefore, where current or past child abuse has been perpetrated by clergy, staff, or volunteers of the church, the church shall provide consultation to encourage the discussion of such incidents and to provide a means to facilitate healing within the church. Below is a suggested model of how this may be done: a congregational trauma debriefing model.

It is essential that each church respond to a report or instance of abuse or misconduct in a manner that promotes healing first for the survivor, as well as for the offender and the loved ones of both parties, as well as healing within the congregation generally.

Traumatic events have well-documented effects, both immediate and delayed. When a congregation experiences a trauma, the impact is likely to be expressed through symptoms such as:

- Loss of energy or feeling of paralysis;
- Distrust of leadership (often projected onto future leadership);
- Divisions within the congregation;
- Some group members feeling isolated and withdrawing from the group;
- Anger being displaced onto unrelated issues, or blown out of proportion;
- A conspiracy of silence about the traumatic event;
- Despair about the congregation's future;
- Distorting responsibility for the event;
- Seeking a "quick fix" without thoughtful reflection;
- Difficulty making normal and necessary decisions.

All of these symptoms could be carried into subsequent years unless the trauma is processed, integrated into the life of the congregation and healed. A useful model for addressing and integrating a trauma is the "debriefing" model drawn from disciplines that do crisis counseling, such as emergency medicine, law enforcement, military science, crisis chaplaincy, and disaster agencies.

A trauma debriefing allows participants to integrate the reality of the event with their own responses to that event. Churches should develop an effective means to communicate, process, and accept facts, allow feelings to surface, and then, through God's healing grace, head into the future unhindered by the past.

2. Guiding Principles for Healing in the Church

The following guidelines outline steps that can be taken to promote healing in the congregation:

1. **Contact with the Family.** Before the process for healing begins, the Bishop or his representative should maintain regular contact with the survivors/complainant(s) and describe to survivors/complainant(s) the procedures to be used for promoting congregational healing.
2. **Privacy Concerns.** The privacy of the survivors/complainant(s) must be balanced against the need for openness with the local church. Insofar as possible, the identity of the survivors/complainant(s) and any details which may identify him/her should be kept confidential.
3. **Providing Facts.** The procedures shall consider that church members usually know when "something is going on," and, in the absence of facts, rumor and speculation will grow.
4. **Notifying Lay Leadership.** The lay leadership should be advised promptly of the issues, since that group's participation is vital in planning and implementing the processes for church healing.
5. **Trauma Debriefing.** The healing and unity of a congregation are fostered when there is an open meeting, called a "Church Information, Trauma, and Healing Debriefing," at which the Bishop or his representative presents as much factual information as possible and provides an opportunity for church members to process and be connected to resources to aid in the healing of the congregation.

Since the local church will likely include people who have experienced abuse or misconduct themselves, appropriate personnel trained in crisis ministry should be present and available on a small group or one-to-one basis immediately after the formal presentation. Also, local mental health resources (including sliding scale fee agencies) should be publicized so that members of the congregation know how to find these services. (Note that many communities have publicly-funded survivor services.)

The debriefing should follow this process set forth in Section 3. The message should be "The Church is a place for truth. We follow Jesus, who described himself as the Way, the Truth and the Life."

- **Church Spokesperson.** The vestry, in consultation with the clergy, is encouraged to appoint a church spokesperson. The congregation, including church members and staff members, is urged to refer all media inquiries to the church spokesperson.
- **Interim Priest.** If the circumstances require that an interim priest be engaged, that priest should have special training in trauma debriefing. The interim priest should have regular opportunities to report and consult with the Bishop, his or her designated staff person, and counselors.
- **Consulting Legal Authorities.** Neither the clergy nor any other church worker should attempt to impede persons who wish to consult with legal authorities.
- **Continuing Pastoral Care.** The clergy and/or vestry should consult with the Bishop about additional resources for the healing and care of the congregation.

3. A Model for a Trauma Debriefing Meeting

Debriefing is a technique devised to help those affected by a specific trauma. Those affected may be suffering from physical or psychological symptoms and debriefing enables those exposed to process the event and its impact on themselves and the community. Debriefing should be done as soon as possible and the community should consult an expert to assist.

The following procedures are recommended for the information and trauma debriefing meeting, but the church and the Bishop should consult in advance with their respective legal counsel (and, if counsel recommends, insurance provider(s)) before conducting such a meeting or undertaking any such actions.

Steps Prior to Meeting

1. **Select Leaders.** Carefully choose a Congregational Trauma Debriefing team and a leader or co-leaders who have had experience with a debriefing or trauma-related process. It is important that the rector or the rector's representative be a visible participant in the debriefing, but not in the role of leadership.
2. **Schedule and Notify.** Schedule the debriefing as soon as possible after the complaint becomes public knowledge. Ensure that all members of the congregation and church staff are notified of the debriefing by telephone, email, overnight mail, or other fast and reliable method of notification. It is important to get a wide participation, so that all who experience the trauma also share the debriefing experience.
3. **Choose Meeting Place.** Hold the debriefing in an appropriate place, preferably on the church's property. Although an opening prayer is appropriate, this should not be a liturgical event.
4. **Address the News Media.** While the debriefing should not be confidential, it is important that no one be placed in jeopardy because of any disclosures made during that meeting. Therefore, it is preferable that the news media not be present for the debriefing, but meet after the debriefing with the church spokesperson and Bishop.

Agenda for the Meeting

1. **Open the Meeting.** The Bishop or his representative should welcome the attendees, as should one of the lay leaders. The lay leader then should introduce himself/herself, explain the debriefing process, and outline the guidelines for the debriefing. It is important to keep the debriefing to the specified procedures. Leaders should be prepared for a lengthy meeting.
2. **Present the Facts.** Subject to the advice of counsel, the general facts and approximate chronology of the trauma should be presented verbally, supplemented by written notations such as a summary handout, or by writing notes on newsprint during the factual presentation. The goal is to ensure that all those present have a common record of the traumatic event. Note that this is not a time for feelings to be expressed, and the group may need some direction to withhold those feelings until the next phase of the debriefing.
3. **Solicit Reactions.** Once an appropriate record has been presented, the lay leader should invite church members to express their reactions to the facts. (Some church members may need to be directed to express their own feelings and not those of others.) No feelings, however trivial, intense, or unusual, should be discounted, and no effort should be made to fix, soothe, or smooth them over. The responses simply are to be collected and heard.

4. **Examine Repercussions.** Once reactions have been expressed fully, the leader should ask those present to turn their attention to the repercussions of the event, and consider the congregation's future. This step bridges the trauma with the ongoing life of those involved in the trauma. It may be a time to explore some of the issues the congregation will face in the near future. As with the presentation of facts, the issues raised may be noted both verbally and in writing.
5. **Seek Context and Perspective.** Members of the congregation also should be invited to place the event within a context or perspective. There may be expressions of confusion, helplessness, or curiosity about how other groups have resolved an issue of this type. In this phase, people may have an awareness of paradox and pose some hard questions such as the following:
 - Why do bad things happen?
 - How can it be that such a talented priest/leader could be involved in misconduct?
 - Why do things like this happen in a church?
 - Where does the responsibility lie?
 - What about the resources of our faith?

Leaders have discretion whether to respond, or to simply allow others speak.

Actions After the Meeting

1. **Plan for the Future.** The final step is planning. This could include
 - Scheduling a follow-up session one or two months into the future;
 - Discussing the ways in which the pastoral and sacramental needs of the congregation will be met; or
 - Describing the resources available to people who may need counseling or other specialized attention.
2. **Provide Trained Counselors.** For the immediate needs of those present, it is important that trained crisis professionals be available in the church building so that individuals or groups may process their feelings further. These professionals are present simply to listen and support people in integrating the trauma.
3. **Debrief the Debriefing.** After the debriefing, members of the Congregational Trauma Debriefing Team should meet to discuss their own experiences with the debriefing meeting, in order to do the following:
 - Plan the follow-up monitoring of the congregation in the future;
 - Determine whether there are issues that will need further clarification;
 - Determine whether there are complicating factors, or factors that require special continuing attention;
 - Decide what the lay leadership of the congregation requires to address the issue further; and evaluate the debriefing meeting itself (or agree to do so at a later date).

Additional Responses & Follow-Up

If new information comes to light after the first debriefing, further meetings may be held.

Additionally, regular follow-up sessions with the congregation should be held during the first year after disclosure of the incident(s). Additional appropriate church responses may include:

- Regular prayer for those directly involved and for the congregation should continue while guarding privacy;
- Preaching on the subject of violation of trust and liturgical acts of corporate penance;
- Seeking to provide a safe environment for the survivor(s)/complainant(s) and their families in community life;

- In the event that incarceration or other punitive action follows legal proceedings, developing a means for the congregation to deal appropriately with the person who may be imprisoned.

Congregational Follow-up: The First Year

Even with the best of care, a congregation that has experienced sexual misconduct will likely need an ongoing program of support and assistance, especially in the first year. This year will be devoted to a healing process, in which the congregation slowly will integrate the reality of its experience into its future. If such integration does not take place, the congregation may suffer from prolonged loss of energy, despair about the future, loss and/or isolation of some members, distrust of lay and/or ordained leadership or of the Bishop, and difficulty making decisions or taking risks.

Suggested congregational follow-up activities may include:

- **Meeting with the Bishop.** A meeting with the Bishop or the Bishop's representative and the vestry in order to assess the healing process of the congregation.
- **Staff Input.** Obtaining input from church staff (including an interim priest where present) about their observations regarding the incident and the debriefing process.
- **Study Groups.** Establishing study groups to consider the issue of healing from sexual abuse, perhaps by reading a selected book for discussion.
- **Self-evaluation.** Conducting a congregational self-evaluation, through the use of a questionnaire or survey instrument.
- **Focus Groups.** Creating congregational focus groups to address the issue of where the congregation stands in its process of moving ahead.
- **Committee on Congregational Life.** Forming a Committee on Congregational Life charged with assessing the needs and planning programs for continued healing.
- **Professional Consultant.** Appointing a professional consultant experienced with issues of child abuse to work with the vestry and affected congregation on the components of the healing process.

Using the Trauma to Help Others

Some churches, having worked through a history of child abuse, take up a special vocation in a related area. Such steps signify that the congregation has moved into the redemptive activity of letting its own pain be a gift for others. Among possible actions:

- **Helping Other Churches.** Offering help to other churches confronted with the same issues.
- **Sponsoring Programs.** Sponsoring seminars or programs on ethics and sexuality.
- **Church Building Use.** Offering the church building for use by community groups to address issues of child abuse.
- **Developing programs for young people** about protecting themselves from abuse.

4. Pastoral Response to Known Sexual Offenders

The church must make every reasonable effort to protect children. Special care must be taken when a church interacts with a person who is registered as a sexual offender, or self-discloses a history of sexual misconduct towards children, or self-discloses a struggle with sexual attraction toward children.

When such a person is known to be a participant in the church or its activities, the clergy shall inhibit that person from any contact with children and shall require (except as otherwise directed by the church's legal counsel) the offender to sign a contract/covenant that details expectations, defines boundaries and off-limits locations (e.g. children's areas, acolyte vesting areas), and establishes appropriate supervision (such as, for example, a bathroom escort) for the offender while on church premises and/or at church activities. The church shall have in place a plan to deal with any violation of the contract/covenant.

If the offender is observed acting in an inappropriate manner with children or their families, the rector or wardens shall inform the family/families of a potential danger to their child/children (unless otherwise directed by the church's legal counsel). Where appropriate, the rector or senior warden shall consult the offender's probation or parole officer to assure that supervision and reporting requirements have been met.