

Abuse: Response & Prevention

Our churches and homes shouldn't be places that hurt

A GUIDE
FOR FAITH
COMMUNITIES



**Mennonite
Central
Committee**

Copyright: 2008, reprinted 2014, 2023

Mennonite Central Committee (MCC)

Permission to copy excerpts of this booklet for educational purposes only.

Not for resale.

Printed in Canada on recycled paper using vegetable based inks.

Cover image by Rod Friesen

Original design by Dana Letkeman and Jennifer DUBY.

Design updated in 2022 by Dana Letkeman.

All Scripture quotations are from the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV), copyright 1989, Division of Christian Education of the National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA.

Used by permission.

Contents

I Introduction	6
II Defining abuse	7
• Physical abuse	
• Emotional abuse	
• Sexual abuse/harassment	
• Spiritual abuse	
III Biblical and theological reflections on abuse	9
• Freedom from oppression and violence	
• Biblical texts used to justify abuse	
• A peace theology response to abuse	
IV Responding to a disclosure of abuse	14
• Responding to victims of abuse	
• Responding to the alleged offender	
V Safety and support issues	16
• Adult victims	
• Child victims	
• Response to offenders	
• Support for caregivers	
VI Legal issues	21
• Abuse against children and teens	
• Abuse against elders and other vulnerable people	
• Abuse against adults	
• Abuse by a church leader	
VII How the church can be proactive in abuse prevention	24
• Address through education	
• Adopt policies and procedures to prevent sexual harassment and abuse	
• Address in worship services	
• Pay attention to theology and how we speak of God	
• Interpret the Bible carefully	
• Model mutuality and respect in all relationships	

VIII Checklist for preventing and responding to abuse	27
• Skills and knowledge for church leaders	
• Tasks for congregations	
IX Resources available from Mennonite Central Committee	29
• Website	
• Brochures	
• Booklets	
• Other resources	
• Programs in Canada which address abuse response and prevention	
X Additional resources	31
• Child abuse	
• Sexual abuse	
• Family violence	
• Prevention	
• Spiritual abuse	
• Working with those who behave abusively	
XI Contributors	34

I Introduction

At an annual conference for pastors and elders, one of the topics for discussion was how their denomination should respond to sexual abuse in the church. The general sense in the room initially was that abuse was not a significant issue in their churches.

However, over the course of the conference, approximately fifteen per cent of the men present shared their experiences of having been sexually abused, a number of them within the context of the church's ministry. Additional stories began to surface of others who had left the church because their experiences of abuse by church members had never been believed. Suddenly the material before them was no longer irrelevant.

Pastors and other church leaders are being confronted with the reality of people in pain from traumatic childhood experiences or because of current situations of abuse. Abuse occurs in many forms and to people at all stages of life. Those with the least power in society, such as children, women and the elderly are most likely to be victims.

This booklet is a general guide designed to provide tools to help care for victims, survivors and perpetrators of abuse. May the God of peace give wisdom and courage.

II Defining abuse

Abuse is one person or group of persons using coercive or manipulative actions to control others. Abuse is about misuse of power. The goal of abusive behaviour is to gain or exercise control over those perceived as weaker.

Abuse is more common when there are pre-existing power differences which can be exploited, such as in the following relationships: male/female, parent/child, teacher/student, pastor/parishioner, older relative/younger relative, caregiver/elderly person.

There are many forms of abuse with significant overlap between the categories mentioned below. The list is not comprehensive, but intended to give some sense of the ways that people who are abusive attempt to control others.

Physical abuse

- Pushing, shoving, shaking
- Slapping, hitting, beating
- Biting, spitting, scratching
- Kicking, choking, pulling hair
- Urinating or defecating on a person or their property
- Locking someone out of the house
- Reckless driving
- Threatening with a weapon
- Threatening to harm or kill
- Abandoning someone in a dangerous place
- Throwing objects

* Sometimes victims of abuse use protection strategies such as shoving in self-defence. Using self-defense to protect oneself (e.g. shoving) is not counter-abuse.

Emotional abuse

- Ignoring or neglecting the feelings of others
- Criticizing or embarrassing others in public
- Constant criticism

- Controlling and refusing to share financial resources with other household members
- Using threats to force compliance, for example threats to commit suicide or leave the relationship
- Manipulating and/or lying
- Hurting or scaring pets
- Breaking, taking or giving away someone's valued things
- Isolating someone
- Giving the "silent treatment"

Sexual abuse/harassment

- Telling insulting gender-related jokes
- Treating someone as a sex object
- Touching someone inappropriately
- Coercing someone into performing any sexual act, such as intercourse or oral sex, with statements like, "If you loved me you would do this"
- Using physical force to gain sexual intimacy
- Rape/sexual assault
- Calling someone sexually-derogatory names
- Coercing someone to view pornography
- Inappropriate/unwanted communication (phone calls, letters, emails, texts)

Spiritual abuse

- Using Scripture or other religious material to control someone's behaviour, thoughts or feelings
- Using a position of church leadership to control or manipulate someone
- Using religious education to have power over others
- Ridiculing another's beliefs

III Biblical and theological reflections on abuse

Freedom from oppression and violence

In Luke 4:18, Jesus declared his mission, passed on to us: to bring release to the captives, sight to the blind and freedom to those who are oppressed. In the context of abuse, this means bringing freedom to those held captive in the cycle of violence and abuse, giving sight to those blind to the destructiveness of their behaviour and ending oppression within our families, relationships and communities. Jesus showed special concern and regard for children and declared dreadful consequences for those who harm them (Matthew 18:1-7).

The Hebrew Scriptures also repeatedly emphasize God's concern for all people, especially those who are most vulnerable: widows, orphans, children, strangers and the poor. Passages such as Psalms 40, 55 and 57, and Isaiah 43:1-7, provide comfort to those victimized by violence, as they speak of God's presence in the midst of pain, and God's desire to rescue us from harm.

The early church continued these concerns. They clearly expressed a desire for people to live in justice and harmony, and gave careful instruction on how to live together peaceably. See especially Galatians 5:22-26, Ephesians 4:1-6, 6:4, Philippians 2:3-11 and Colossians 3:12-17.

Biblical texts used to justify abuse

Physical punishment

Proverbs 13:24 states, "Those who spare the rod hate their children, but those who love them are diligent to discipline them." The rod in this passage was not a stick for spanking or striking a child. It was the shepherd's staff, used to guide sheep away from danger, such as cliffs or sharp rocks. The shepherd gently placed the rod on the side of the sheep to steer it away from danger. This verse was never intended as an excuse for parents to beat their children. Beating a child is a criminal offence.

Divorce

Malachi 2:13-16 mentions that God "hates divorce." Yet the focus of this passage is on husbands who mistreat their wives and are unfaithful to them. The prophet goes on to chastise men for not keeping covenant with their wives, causing divorce and covering themselves with violence. This passage emphasizes God's displeasure with unfaithfulness and violence.

Turning the other cheek

Matthew 5:39 has also been used to condone acceptance of abuse: “If anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also....” Theologians such as Walter Wink argue that the intention of this saying was not to let others hurt us again and again. In that culture, the left hand was considered unclean and improper to use. The only way the right cheek could be hit by the right hand of another was with the back of the hand. Everyone listening to Jesus knew that people would only backhand those with less power than themselves. For example, masters would backhand slaves, Romans would backhand Jews, husbands would backhand wives and parents would backhand children.

The purpose of hitting this way was not to injure, but to humiliate the other. Backhanding was intended to communicate, “You stay in your place, which is beneath me.” Now, if someone turned their left cheek to the person who had just backhanded them, they could only be hit with the open hand, with a gesture used only between equals. Therefore, “turning the other cheek” allowed the person being hit to declare their equality with the person hitting them.¹

(Note: In our time, violence of any form is unacceptable.)

Similarly, Jesus’ instruction not to “...resist an evildoer” (Matthew 5:39) has been used to exhort people to be passive in the face of violence and oppression. Wink argues that the Greek word for resist was understood to mean violent resistance, and a more correct translation would be, “Do not resist an evildoer with violence.”²

Bearing the cross

Another difficult passage has been Jesus’ call to his followers to “deny themselves and take up their cross” (Mark 8:34-37). Over the centuries, people in powerful positions have used these words to urge those in oppressive situations to bear their cross of suffering meekly just as Jesus did. What is often forgotten is that Jesus was crucified not due to his meekness but rather because of his active resistance to oppression and his strong work for justice and peace. He touched those who were considered unclean, healed them and ate with them. In this way Jesus undermined the rules and customs which kept people in bondage. His teachings also threatened the ruling authorities and their control over the people. Jesus’ invitation to “take up the cross” is not a call for us to be passive, but to work courageously for justice and peace as he did.

¹ Wink, Walter. *Jesus and Nonviolence: A Third Way* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2003) 14-15.

² Wink, Walter. *The Powers That Be* (New York: Galilee Trade, 1999) 99-101.

Repentance and forgiveness

There is often strong pressure put on the victim of abuse to quickly forgive and be reconciled to the offender. Texts such as Colossians 3:13 and Matthew 6:15 are used to urge the offended person to forgive. However, quick forgiveness without true repentance on the part of the offender is not a healing experience for either the victim or the perpetrator of abuse, and can in fact endanger the life of the victim.

In Luke 17:3, Jesus teaches that repentance must precede forgiveness. Genuine repentance includes not only remorse and confession, but also taking full responsibility for one's abusive behaviour, naming the injustice, making long-term changes in beliefs and behaviour, and making restitution (such as paying for counselling) where possible. Ezekiel 18:30-32 makes it clear that repentance involves getting "a new heart."

The survivor may never trust the offender enough to renew the relationship. Forgiveness ultimately is a process by which the survivor stops letting the experience dominate her or his life. It is a process of letting go and moving on in healthy ways. If reconciliation is not possible, it may be necessary to mourn the loss of these relationships or mourn what might have been.

Submission and headship

Passages such as Ephesians 5:21-33, Colossians 3:18-19 and I Peter 3:1-7 are often used to justify violence against women, as they call for a wife to submit to her husband. Yet the Greek word translated here as "submit" or "be subject to" can also be understood as "accommodation to" or "to be attached to or identify with another."³ Further, if the Ephesians text is read in its entirety, nine verses focus on husbands and only three on wives. Husbands are instructed to love their wives, "... as Christ loved the church." This leaves no room for a husband's abusive behaviours towards his wife, since men have a responsibility to cherish and honour their spouses. Neither does it obligate women to stay and tolerate abuse.

This text also draws a parallel between the "headship" of a husband in relation to his wife and the relationship of Christ to the church. Often this concept of headship is used to argue superiority and a controlling authority over women. However the Greek word used for "head" is *kephale*, a word which is also used to describe the life source of a river.⁴ In Scripture, Christ models relationships which are life-giving and

³ Compelman-Blair, J. Martha, "New Lenses for Viewing Submission," Priscilla Papers, Summer 2007: 5.

⁴ Ibid, 5.

empowering to the church and all those with whom he interacted. Christ loved selflessly and this is the type of love relationship this passage teaches for marriage partners.

A peace theology response to abuse

Our peace theology calls us to reject violence. Yet it also asks us to acknowledge where we have power, and to use that power for the well-being of others. We must use the power we have to resist evil and violence as Jesus did. We cannot turn away from it. As the late June Callwood, a Canadian philanthropist, writer and journalist often said, “If any of you happens to see an injustice, you are no longer a spectator, you are a participant, and you have an obligation to do something.” Similarly, James 4:17 insists, “Anyone then, who knows the right thing to do and fails to do it, commits sin.”

Gayle Gerber Koontz, in an article called “Redemptive Resistance to Violation of Women: Christian Power, Justice, and Self-Giving Love” explains:

Redemptive resistance to evil seems to imply different things depending on one’s relational standing point.... For example, an abuser who professes to be a Christian must resist the habit, desire and need to control, and must let go of dominating power in relation to others, especially in relation to women.... A victim, on the other hand, usually needs to claim her power to act and to develop a sense of self and its value. In this case a theological and personal reorientation that emphasizes God’s love for women, desire for justice, care for the suffering, and empowerment of the weak and marginalized is critical.⁵

In addition, Christians need to be careful how we understand and depict God. Having only images of God as male, judge, king, omnipotent and sovereign is dangerous as these images can be used to justify having power over others. Abuse happens when those with more power believe they have the right to control and manipulate those who are considered weaker or less worthy. So it is important to also use images of God which are nurturing and life-giving, such as light, healer, redeemer, mother eagle, midwife, shepherd, guide, comforter, advocate, sustainer and shelter.

⁵ Gerber Koontz, Gayle, “Redemptive Resistance to Violation of Women: Christian Power, Justice, and Self-Giving Love.” *Peace Theology and Violence Against Women*, Occasional Papers No 16, ed. Elizabeth G. Yoder (Elkhart, IN: Institute of Mennonite Studies, 1992) 39.

Ultimately, God desires that all follow the way of Christ: to show love to everyone, work for justice, care for the suffering, empower the weak and hold accountable those who hurt others. As the Scriptures urge: “Speak out for those who cannot speak, for the rights of all the destitute. Speak out, judge righteously, defend the rights of the poor and needy” (Proverbs 31:8-9).

IV Responding to a disclosure of abuse

The response of the church when someone comes forward with a disclosure of abuse is critical. Below are some general guidelines for responding to disclosures of abuse. Please see MCC's resource *Guide for Responding to Congregational Sexual Harassment and Abuse* (2021) for more thorough recommendations for supporting victims and offenders: <https://abuseresponseandprevention.ca/news/new-resource-a-guide-for-responding-to-congregational-sexual-harassment-and-abuse/>.

Responding to victims of abuse

- Recognize the seriousness of what you are being told. Listen carefully to the victim's story and believe them.
- Be concerned about possible injuries; is medical attention needed?
- Be concerned about safety. Be sure that a safe place is available, whether in a home or a shelter. Assist the victim in contacting such a place in your community.
- Be familiar with local resources available to victims of abuse and pass that information on to the victim. Local programs may include support groups and therapy resources.
- The victim may believe that they are the cause of the abuse. Reassure them that no one deserves to be hurt.
- The victim may be very ambivalent. An abusive person can also at times be loving, and the victim may have internalized a great deal of responsibility for the abusive behaviour.
- The abuser may have greatly damaged the victim's self-esteem and confidence. Do not reinforce that low self-esteem by taking over and making decisions for the victim.
- Continue to provide pastoral care, and encourage the victim to pursue professional counselling.
- Do not recommend couples counselling, as this is not appropriate in situations of intimate partner abuse.
- **Recognize that if the abuse is not addressed, it will continue and get worse.**

Responding to the alleged offender

- The violence must stop. This is the first priority.
- Be aware that the accused may try to minimize the behaviour or blame the victim.
- Offer hope that change is possible. Check with your local shelter, crisis hotline, mental health centre or MCC to find resources in your area.
- Hold the abusive person accountable. Promises to change are a part of the cycle of violence. For meaningful change to occur, the abuser must accept full responsibility for the violence and make long-term concrete changes in beliefs and behaviours.
- Do not take the abuser's word as evidence the violence has stopped. Rather, check with the abused person. If the abuse continues, it may be necessary to take safety measures for the protection of the victim.
- Individual counselling and group therapy designed especially for those who behave abusively are essential.
- **Couples/family counselling which occurs prematurely may serve to endanger the victim further!**

Adapted from material by Janet Reedy and Ruby Friesen Zehr (MCC Domestic Violence Task Force, 1987).

V Safety and support issues

Safety is a key issue, particularly in domestic violence situations. Adults who face harassment or abuse from those who have power over them (spouses, employers or adult children caring for aging parents) may need help to minimize further victimization and fear. Child victims must be protected from further harm.

Safety is both an emotional and physical issue. Those physically removed from an abusive situation often still face intimidation. The echo of past threats may still cause the victim to live in fear. A child who has been abused may not know whom to trust.

In a situation of abuse, the elements of fear and intimidation do not make honest confrontation possible. For example an elderly man may believe his daughter is stealing money from him. If he is dependent on her for some level of care, he will hesitate to confront her, fearing that she may stop taking him for groceries, or may refuse to give him his medication. It is essential for vulnerable people to have an advocate who can assist them in dealing with the abusive situation. For instance, if the elderly man goes to a deacon in his church, it is then the responsibility of the deacon (with the help of the church) to make sure the man's needs are being met, while dealing with the legal and moral issue of a possible theft.

Not all suggested measures listed will apply to all situations. Together with the victim, ascertain which steps will be the most helpful in increasing safety for the victim and their family.

Adult victims

Things you can do to support survivors of abuse:

1. **Believe:** When an individual comes forward and discloses an experience of abuse, it is essential that they are taken seriously. Responses that insinuate disbelief or skepticism will further harm the victim and compound their trauma. Many people do not speak about their experiences of abuse precisely because they fear being blamed or not being believed. The most compassionate response is to listen nonjudgmentally.
2. **Validate:** Show empathy and affirm that whatever happened to them is NOT their fault. Most people who have been victimized or violated blame themselves. You hear this in comments such as, "I shouldn't have gone to his house," "I didn't do anything to resist it, I should have said something," "It's my fault because I let it happen." There is only one person at fault and responsible for abusive

behaviour and that is the person who abuses their power and takes advantage of someone's vulnerability. It is so important for victim-survivors of any kind of abuse to hear that the abuse or violation is NOT their fault, and that there is nothing they did to deserve it.

3. **Assess safety:** The safety and well-being of those we care about should be our utmost priority. If the abuse happened recently or is ongoing, it is imperative to explore any safety concerns the individual may have and ways to mitigate risks.
4. **Empower:** Abuse is the ultimate form of taking away power and control from an individual. When someone comes forward and discloses abuse, we need to trust that they are the expert of their experience and respect how they would like to proceed. Present options, but refrain from discouraging or encouraging certain actions. The person who has been harmed needs to be included in the process proceeding a disclosure.
5. **Refer:** Connect the individual to resources or organizations that can assist them and help them explore their options. If you are a pastor, it is appropriate to offer spiritual support and coordinate practical assistance for the individual. However, any type of post-trauma counselling needs to be offered by a trained professional. There are many faith-based counsellors trained to provide therapy to victim-survivors of abuse. It is essential that you make a referral if the individual wishes to receive counselling.
6. **Know limitations of confidentiality:** The decision to report abuse or sexual violence to the police is always up to the victim. However, in situations where minors are involved or the person suspected of abuse is in a position of trust (church leader) and is continuing to interact with other vulnerable persons, it needs to be reported to the denominational body. When a minor is involved, it must be reported to child welfare authorities. This can be scary for a victim, which is why having a support person or advocate is essential. It is best to support the victim in making this report and including them in the process. Reporting in these instances is about ensuring that other vulnerable people are not being harmed and that there can be accountability.
7. **Follow up:** Offer to check in with the individual periodically to see how they are doing. You can ask about coping, support and safety.

Further considerations

- Healing from abuse is a journey that takes time, self-compassion and dedication. Victim-survivors may experience a host of emotions that

ebb and flow over time. You can help to normalize and assure the friend or loved one that their thoughts, feelings and reactions are normal.

- Reflect back their inner strength and acknowledge the courage it took to simply entrust their experience to you.
- Seek support for yourself—if you know the abuser, it can be difficult to believe that they would act abusively. These thoughts and feelings, while normal, should not be expressed with the one you are supporting. You may want to call a confidential sexual assault crisis line or a counsellor who can help you process your own reactions.
- If the person you are supporting is struggling with depression, anxiety, or PTSD because of their experience, know that it is a normal part of sexual assault trauma. The person may need support and resources to cope well and get help. Major depression, anxiety or PTSD should not go untreated. Seeking help through a therapist or doctor may play an important part in healing.

For those in situations of intimate partner violence, these are some specific things you can do to protect yourself or as a support person, things you can encourage a victim-survivor to do:

- Before the next outburst, think about ways to leave before violence starts.
- Stay out of rooms with weapons.
- Make arrangements for a safe place to stay if there is a threat of violence. This location should not place others in danger. It may be a shelter, a hotel or a friend or relative's home where the perpetrator won't think to look for the victim.
- Keep a list of people to contact if a dangerous situation occurs.
- Memorize important phone numbers.
- Establish a code word or sign so that family or friends will know when to call for help.
- Prepare a bag with necessary items and leave in a safe place (i.e. friend, neighbour, work). Items include phone card, money, extra set of clothes and shoes, toys and clothes for children, medications and prescriptions, extra keys for house, car and office, phone number of emergency shelters.
- Have originals or copies of important legal papers ready. These include social security or social insurance card, medical cards, birth certificates, address book, driver's license and registration,

marriage license, passports, leases, mortgage papers or deeds, copy of restraining order or peace bond, bank statements or other financial records, insurance papers, children's school and immunization records.

- Encourage the victim to have a credit card and bank account in their own name.

Child victims

Addressing safety

- Safety for the child is the first priority.
- If no one else is willing to report the abuse to authorities, it is the legal obligation of the church to do so.
- Work with the child safety agency in your area to find a safe home for the child to live in.
- If one parent has reported the abuse to the authorities, assist that parent in providing a safe, healthy environment for the child.

Providing support for child victims

- Believe the child's story. Very seldom does a child lie concerning their experiences of abuse.
- Assure the child of your support.
- Ensure privacy and confidentiality for the child, but explain your legal obligation to report a criminal offence to the authorities.
- It is not the church's responsibility to investigate. That is under the authority of the child protection agency.
- Provide age-appropriate information about resources for healing available in the community.
- Support older children to make decisions for themselves whenever possible.

Response to offenders

- It is important for the church to hold accountable those who abuse others.
- Find two or three people of the same gender to provide accountability and support.
- Make sure the offender attends counselling sessions designed for those with abusive behaviours.
- Do not allow the offender to minimize the abuse.

- State clearly that what the offender has done is a serious offence.
- Guide the offender towards confession, repentance and restitution.
- Provide spiritual care.

Support for caregivers

Walking alongside a victim of abuse can be physically and emotionally challenging. The abusive person may issue threats and attempt to gain support from members of the congregation. This can create division and caregivers may get caught up in the conflict. It is important to draw support from outside the congregation to help mediate and to provide resources to the caregivers and the congregation.

Caring for victims

- Share the caregiving role with at least one other person.
- Set boundaries for yourself in order to prevent burnout.
- Educate yourself on the issue of abuse.
- Keep confidences.
- Do not confront the abusive person! Keep your energies for caring for the victims.

Caring for offenders

- Share the caregiving/accountability role with others.
- Set boundaries for yourself, in order to keep safe.
- Educate yourself on the issue of abuse.
- Never meet with the offender alone!
- Do not give personal contact information, unless you feel safe to do so.
- Do everything you can to keep yourself as well as your own family members safe.
- Keep confidences because the consequences of telling others of the situation could further jeopardize the well-being of the victims and their family and caregivers.

** You are not alone: MCC staff who work on abuse issues are available to assist you. See abuseresponseandprevention.ca/contact for contact information. Also, check out resources in your area.*

VI Legal issues

While all forms of abuse are harmful and wrong, there are specific types of abuse that are considered crimes in Canada. This includes things like stalking, assault, sexual abuse, exploitation and viewing or distributing child abuse images. You can learn more about what kinds of abuse are criminal on the Government of Canada website: <https://www.justice.gc.ca/eng/cj-jp/fv-vf/laws-lois.html>

Abuse against children and teens

All of us have a responsibility to protect children, teens and other vulnerable people from harm. All adults are mandated by law to report disclosures of abuse to the authorities.

The Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) define child abuse as any form of physical, psychological, social, emotional or sexual maltreatment of a child whereby the survival, safety, self-esteem, growth and development of the child are endangered. There are four main types of child abuse: neglect, emotional, physical and sexual.

Neglect: failure to give due attention or care to a child resulting in serious emotional or physical harm.

Emotional abuse: verbal attacks or demeaning actions that impact a child's self-esteem and self-worth.

Physical abuse: the intentional use of force against a child resulting in injury or causing bodily harm.

Sexual abuse: any form of sexual conduct (touching, exploitation, intercourse) directed at a child.

Further information can be obtained by accessing the RCMP website: <https://www.justice.gc.ca/eng/cj-jp/fv-vf/ca-me.html>

Child abuse usually reflects patterns of behaviour rather than an isolated incident. The vast majority of child abusers are parents, relatives, or trusted adults, not strangers. Children rarely lie about abuse. Child abuse knows no class boundaries.⁶

⁶ Sustainable Development Goals Knowledge Platform, retrieved from the internet June 27, 2022 <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/topics/violenceagainstchildren>

Forms of abuse include:

- Non-accidental injury including striking, kicking, burning, choking or biting.
- Manufacturing, selling or handling of a controlled substance (illegal drug) in the presence of a child, or on the premises occupied by the child.
- Selling, distributing or giving drugs or alcohol to a child.
- Deprivation of adequate food, clothing, shelter or medical care.
- Verbal assault, isolation or rejection.
- Abandonment.
- Offering pornography.

Church leaders should not attempt to gather detailed evidence from the person who discloses. This is the responsibility of child protective services or child welfare agencies.

Again, the safety of the child victim of abuse is of utmost importance.

Once a church becomes aware of abuse, church leaders should work with the non-abusive parent and child welfare authorities to remove the child from danger and find a safe place to live.

Abuse against elders and other vulnerable people

When a senior citizen or a person with cognitive or physical disabilities has been abused and cannot defend themselves, church leaders are often called upon to give assistance. Should a vulnerable person disclose abuse, it is the moral obligation of clergy to notify the authorities. Most provinces have advocacy agencies for seniors and those with mental or physical disabilities who can provide valuable resources and assistance.

Most commonly, an elder is abused by someone who is in a position of trust or authority. It may be a spouse, son or daughter, other family member, friend, paid caregiver or Power of Attorney (POA).

Forms this abuse can take are:

- **Financial:** Improper or illegal use of money, assets or property, without the person's permission or knowledge, misuse of the power of attorney.
- **Physical:** violence or rough treatment, even if it does not result in injury, threat of physical force, inappropriate use of medications or restraints.

- **Emotional:** Name calling, intimidation, threats, yelling, ignoring, social isolation, treating like a child.
- **Sexual:** Sexual contact without consent, pressure of intimacy, fondling, touching, sexual assault, sexual comments, jokes and leering.
- **Neglect:** abandonment, physical, emotional or financial neglect, situations where a person has a responsibility to provide care or assistance but does not.

Abuse against adults

If an abusive act is committed against an adult, it is up to that person to file a report. However, the church must come alongside the victim and provide support. The church can also play a significant role in providing accountability and support for the offender.

In some situations, court orders, such as “protection from abuse” or “no contact” orders, may be helpful. These can discourage the offender from continuing to contact, threaten or stalk the victim. However, these orders cannot guarantee safety and the victim will continue to need support and assistance. Always encourage the victim to document any violations of these court orders. Domestic violence shelters, legal clinics, counsellors and other community agencies can provide much helpful professional and legal assistance and the church should assist the victim in gaining access to these resources.

Abuse by a church leader

When a child or adult is abused in any way by a member of the clergy or by a youth leader, Sunday school teacher or another person from the congregation, it is an abuse of power, and the church must deal with the abuse immediately. While an investigation takes place, the responsibilities of the alleged offender should be suspended.

When a criminal offence has occurred (see page 21 for a link to more information), it is the victim’s choice whether or not to report to the authorities. The exception is when children or vulnerable people are at risk. All other types of abuse are still an offence of one person against another and should be addressed. This should include an investigation and a process which assures the protection of the victim/s, holds the abusive person accountable and provides forums for healing for all concerned. It is essential to seek assistance from outside the congregation, such as denominational leaders and professionals trained in dealing with abuse by a church leader or caregiver. MCC resources listed on pages 29-30 are helpful in responding to abuse by a church leader.

VII How the church can be proactive in abuse prevention

Address through education offered by the church

- Offer classes on parenting in respectful, non-violent ways.
- Teach mutuality and equality between men and women and offer classes to address sexism and abuse issues.
- In marriage retreats or enrichment programs, stress that violence or coercion is never acceptable.
- During pre-marital counselling, include topics such as mutuality, communication, conflict, violence, power, control and decision-making.
- For youth, plan sessions on issues related to coming of age, identity, relationships and sexuality. Separate sessions for women and men may facilitate more honest discussion and teaching.
- Offer classes on conflict transformation.

Adopt policies and procedures to prevent sexual harassment and abuse

- Create safe meeting and counselling places, by having windows in all doors and two adults present when meeting with children and youth.
- Screen all volunteers and staff and require that volunteers attend church for at least six months prior to working with children and youth.
- Provide regular training for parents, Sunday school teachers and youth workers about harassment and abuse.
- See the MCC booklet *Guide for Responding to Congregational Sexual Harassment and Abuse (2021)* for more thorough recommendations for supporting victims and offenders: <https://abuseresponseandprevention.ca/news/new-resource-a-guide-for-responding-to-congregational-sexual-harassment-and-abuse/>

Address in worship services

- Plan special worship services and prayers for those affected by abuse and violence at home, nationally and internationally.
- Study and preach from difficult texts, such as the rape of Tamar.
- Use texts that advocate mutuality between men and women, and mutuality between those with power and those without.

- Include stories of healing from abuse as appropriate.
- When praying for peace in the world, pray also for peace and safety in our homes.
- Observe Domestic Violence Prevention Month (November) and Child Abuse Prevention Month (April).

Pay attention to theology and how we speak of God

- Be alert to how teachings about forgiveness, obedience and bearing the cross may affect those suffering abuse.
- Stress God’s concern for life, healing and wholeness. In addition to Jesus’ experience of the cross and resurrection, emphasize his example, teaching and ministry with those who were suffering.
- Be aware of images or language for God such as father, king or lord which may be painful for victims. Balance these with other biblical images of God, such as redeemer, creator, healer.
- Make sure the church’s portrayal of God matches what Jesus taught and modelled: that God cares deeply for those who are weak and vulnerable.

Interpret the Bible carefully

- Understand the Bible in its cultural and historical contexts and make careful application to our present day situation.
- Include biblical texts with women in major roles. Note that set lectionaries do not necessarily do this.
- For children’s story times include Bible stories that highlight women, and use inclusive language to help children understand that all people are valued by God.
- Consider using an inclusive language version of the Bible such as New Revised Standard Version, New International Version (2011), New Living Translation or The Message.

Model mutuality and respect in all relationships

- Give attention to complementary teams of male and female leadership at all levels.
- Use respectful language and tone in all relationships.
- Avoid jokes about family violence or destructive metaphors such as “rule of thumb.” (This originated as a guide for the thickness of the stick with which a husband could beat his wife.)

- In decision-making, commit to listening to all voices and make decisions that serve the common good.
- Expect all congregational leaders to use healthy conflict transformation skills.
- Be careful not to imply that positions of authority are divinely ordained and cannot be questioned. Assume that all human authority is subject to sin, and must be held accountable.

Adapted from material by Linda Gehman Peachey and Steve Thomas, September 2005

VIII Checklist for preventing and responding to abuse

Pastors and church leaders play a crucial role in creating communities that are safe, respectful and nurturing. It is therefore essential for church leaders to be self-aware and have healthy personal boundaries. It is also important for them to model and actively encourage mutuality and partnership between men and women. These qualities, along with the skills and tasks listed below, all contribute toward helping congregations and families become abuse free.

Skills and knowledge for church leaders

- Understand the biblical basis for mutuality between men and women.
- Identify signs of a healthy relationship and signs of an abusive relationship, with special attention to relationships where there is an imbalance of power, such as between men and women, adults and children, congregational leaders and lay people.
- Identify elements of healthy sexuality and actively promote this in the congregation.
- Know the steps to be taken when a child discloses abuse, and when an adult discloses abuse.
- Be aware of the consequences for survivors of sexual violation and/or intimate partner abuse.
- Understand why it is essential to refer survivors and perpetrators of abuse to counsellors with specialized training.
- Understand why couple's counselling is not appropriate in situations of abuse.
- Be familiar with your denomination's policy regarding sexual misconduct.
- Identify why pornography use can be harmful and dangerous.
- Prepare a list of reputable counsellors in your area who specialize in abuse dynamics.

Tasks for congregations

- Promote healthy relationships in families and the congregation in Sunday school, worship times, premarital counselling and church membership preparation.
- Implement child protection policies and procedures for your congregation.
- Provide safety, support and healing in tangible ways for survivors of abuse, including sensitivity to how sermons, songs and prayers may affect those suffering abuse.
- Develop a support, accountability and healing plan for those who have been abusive.
- Offer and lead rituals of lament, healing and hope which respond to abuse, in both private and corporate settings.
- Place *Home: A safe place for all* brochures in washroom stalls. Brochures are available from MCC.
- Have resources in your library that can help survivors of abuse.

IX Resources available from Mennonite Central Committee

This booklet is available in Spanish and German:

Respondiendo y Previniendo el Abuso, booklet, 2009

Missbrauch: Hilfe und Vorbeugung, booklet, 2010

Website

The Mennonite Central Committee website

www.abuseresponseandprevention.ca includes numerous articles, stories and tools for people who have experienced abuse and for those who are supporting them.

Brochures (free)

The brochure *Home: A safe place for all* can be obtained from your nearest MCC office and is available in English, French, German, Chinese, Swahili and Spanish.

These brochures can be placed in women's and men's washroom stalls in your church to be available in a safe, anonymous manner. A holder to display them can also be ordered.

Booklets

- *Guide for Responding to Congregational Sexual Harassment and Harm*, by David Driedger and Jaymie Friesen, 2021
- *Walking together: A training manual for support people in cases of church leader sexual misconduct*, by Carol Penner with Heather Block, 2022
- *Sacred Trust... fostering safe space in congregations*, by Carol Penner, 2019
- *Safe Zone: Promoting Healing Boundaries in Christian Camps*, by Carol Penner
- *Created Equal, Women and Men in God's Image*, booklet, by Linda Gehman Peachey, 2009
- *Understanding Sexual Abuse by a Church Leader or Caregiver*, booklet, by Heather Block, 2003, Revised 2nd edition, 2011
- *Pornography: Lies, Truth and Hope*, booklet, 2013

Other resources

MCC also has books, videos, worship resources and other materials that can be purchased or borrowed. Contact your nearest MCC office for more information, or visit the website: abuseresponseandprevention.ca.

Programs in Canada which address abuse response and prevention:

MCC British Columbia, End Abuse

201-33933 Gladys Avenue

Abbotsford, BC V2S 2E8

Unceded Sumas & Matsqui First Nations land,
part of Sto:lo Nation territory

(604)-850-6639 or toll free (888)-622-6337

endabuse@mccbc.ca

MCC Manitoba, Abuse Response and Prevention

159 Henderson Highway

Winnipeg, MB R2L 1L4

Treaty 1 Territory and Homeland of the Métis

204-925-1917

arp@mccmb.ca

MCC Ontario, Restorative Justice Program

203-50 Kent Avenue

Kitchener, Ontario N2G 3R1

Homeland of the Haudenosaunee, Anishinaabe and
Attiwonderonk peoples on the Haldimand Tract
granted to the Six Nations of the Grand River

1-800-313-6226

restorativejustice@mcco.ca

MCC Saskatchewan, Peacebuilding Program

600 45th St. West

Saskatoon, SK S7L 5W9

Treaty 6 Territory and Homeland of the Métis

306-665-2555

saskoffice@mccsk.ca

For more information about the above programs and more resources, please visit abuseresponseandprevention.ca.

X Additional resources

Child abuse

Hegstrom, Paul. *Broken Children, Grown-Up Pain: Understanding the Effects of Your Wounded Past*. Kansas City, KS: Beacon Hill Press, 2006.

Fortune, Marie M. *Confidentiality and Mandatory Reporting: A Clergy Dilemma?* <http://www.faithtrustinstitute.org/resources/articles/child-abuse>.

Harder, Jeanette. *Let the Children Come: Preparing Faith Communities to End Child Abuse and Neglect*. Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 2010.

Pais, Janet. *Suffer the Children: A Theology of Liberation by a Victim of Child Abuse*. Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1991.

Sexual abuse

Fortune, Marie M. *Sexual Violence: The Sin Revisited*. Cleveland, OH: The Pilgrim Press, 2005.

Heggen, Carolyn H. *Sexual Abuse in Christian Homes and Churches*. Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, reprint 2006.

Heitritter, Lynn & Voight, Jeanette. *Helping Victims of Sexual Abuse: A Sensitive, Biblical Guide for Counselors, Victims and Families*. Grand Rapids, MI: Bethany House Publishers, 1989.

McClintock, Karen A. *Preventing Sexual Abuse in Congregations: A Resource for Leaders*. Herndon, VA: The Alban Institute, 2004.

Yantzi, Mark. *Sexual Offending and Restoration*. Waterloo and Scottsdale: Herald Press, 1998.

Family violence

Alsdurf, James and Phyllis. *Battered Into Submission*. Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 1998.

Bancroft, Lundy. *When Dad Hurts Mom: Helping Your Children Heal the Wounds of Witnessing Abuse*. New York: Berkley Books, 2004.

Block, Isaac I. *Assault on God's Image: Domestic Abuse*. Winnipeg: Windflower Communications, 1991.

Cory, Jill and McAndless-Davis, Karen. *When Love Hurts: A Woman's Guide to Understanding Abuse in Relationships*. New Westminster, BC: WomanKind Press, second edition, 2008. <http://whenlovehurts.ca/>

Cunningham, Alison and Baker, Linda. *Little Eyes, Little Ears: How Violence Against a Mother Shapes Children as They Grow*. London, ON: Centre for Children & Families in the Justice System, 2007.

Fortune, Marie M. & Marshall, Joretta, Editors. *Forgiveness and Abuse: Jewish and Christian Reflections*. New York: The Haworth Press, Inc., 2002.

Kroeger, Catherine Clark and Nason-Clark, Nancy. *No Place for Abuse: Biblical & Practical Resources to Counteract Domestic Violence*. Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2001. 2nd edition, 2010.

Miles, Al. *Domestic Violence, What Every Pastor Needs to Know*. Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 2000.

Miller, Melissa. *Family Violence: The Compassionate Church Responds*. Waterloo and Scottdale: Herald Press, 1994.

Penner, Carol. *Healing Waters: Churches Working to End Violence Against Women*. Toronto, ON: Women's Inter-Church Council of Canada, 2003.

The Rave Project: Religion and Violence e-learning
www.theraveproject.com.

Soto Albrecht, Elizabeth. *Family Violence, Reclaiming a Theology of Nonviolence*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2008.

Prevention

Miles, Al. *Ending Violence in Teen Dating Relationships: A Resource Guide for Parents and Pastors*. Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 2005.

Yarrow Morris, Susan in collaboration with Jean Anton. *Opening the Door: A Pastor's Guide to Addressing Domestic Violence in Premarital Counselling*. Seattle, WA: FaithTrust Institute, 2006.

Spiritual abuse

Johnson, David & Van Vonderen, Jeff. *The Subtle Power of Spiritual Abuse: Recognizing & Escaping Spiritual Manipulation and False Spiritual Authority Within The Church*. Grand Rapids, MI: Bethany House Publishing, 1991.

Kroeger, Catherine Clark and Beck, James R., eds. *Women, Abuse and the Bible, How Scripture Can be Used to Hurt or Heal*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 3rd printing, 2004.

Working with those who behave abusively

Bancroft, Lundy. *Why Does He Do That? Inside the Minds of Angry and Controlling Men*. New York: Berkley, 2002.

Livingston, David L. *Healing Violent Men: A Model for Christian Communities*. Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 2002.

XI Contributors

Contributors to the initial production of this booklet, 2008 were:

Lynell Bergen, MCC Manitoba
Mental Health and Disabilities Program Coordinator

Linda Gehman Peachey, MCC U.S.
Women's Advocacy Director

Elsie Goerzen, MCC British Columbia
Abuse Prevention Program Coordinator

Angela Klassen, MCC Canada
National Programs Assistant

Jane Woelk, MCC Manitoba
Voices for Non-Violence Program Coordinator

Voices for Non-Violence Advisory Committee: Linda Dueck, Connie Epp,
Roberta Fast, Gordon Kroeker, Maria Lodge, Deborah Martin-Koop

This resource was originally developed and printed in 2008, it was updated and reprinted in 2023.



**Mennonite
Central
Committee**

MCC Alberta

210-2946 32nd Street NE , Calgary, AB T1Y 6J7
(403) 275-6935

MCC Atlantic Canada

P.O. Box 292, Moncton, NB E1C 8K9
(506) 383-9339

MCC British Columbia

33933 Gladys Ave, Box 2038, Abbotsford, BC V2T 3T8
(604) 850-6639

MCC Canada

134 Plaza Drive, Winnipeg, MB R3T 5K9
(844) 732-2346

MCC Manitoba

134 Plaza Drive, Winnipeg, MB R3T 5K9
(204) 261-6381

MCC Ontario

203-50 Kent Avenue, Kitchener, ON N2G 3R1
(519) 745-8458

MCC Québec

200-4824 Chemin de la Côte-des-Neiges, Montréal, QC H3V 1G4
(514) 278-3008

MCC Saskatchewan

600 45th Street West, Saskatoon, SK S7L 5W9
(306) 665-2555

Call your nearest office in Canada toll free 1-888-622-6337.

mccc.ca | abuseresponseandprevention.ca