

RESPONSE

To Concerns, Allegations, and Suspicions of Abuse



The basics of this section are listen, do something, and follow the law—but the manner in which that is done may vary. Many churches have found that having a Response Team is helpful when concerns, allegations or complaints are brought forward. Some have standing Response Teams so that no time is lost in establishing one when needed. Five members works best, any three of which might respond to a given concern. Five members on stand-by allows for gender diversity and spare members if there might be a conflict of interest. This sample policy uses a Response Team. Others use the pastor as the lead responder, which often exhausts the emotional resources of the pastor who is already full-time in serving the church. Discuss carefully which approach works best for your congregation.

SAMPLE POLICY TEXT BELOW



Response and Reporting Procedure

All participants in St. Sanctuary's ministry are encouraged to contact church leaders if they are ever concerned about a safety issue, whether it's a hazardous sidewalk or they witness or hear about risk of harm to a child, youth or vulnerable adult in the church. Any member or guest of St. Sanctuary is encouraged to act without hesitation or fear of reprisal if he or she witnesses, experiences, or hears about situations involving abuse, harassment, or exploitation.

- All concerns and allegations shall be taken seriously and receive some type of action or response immediately, according to church policy.

Information about the concern, observation, or allegation can be given to a Pastor, Youth Director, a member of the standing Response Team or anyone serving on _____ (the governing board). An individual with a complaint or allegation may be asked to complete a written report describing the basis for her or her concern.

A.

The complainant[s] need not be the victim of the inappropriate behavior, but instead may be an observer or someone who has been told information by a victim. Any committee of St. Sanctuary may also initiate the formal complaint process. Any person bringing a harassment or exploitation complaint or assisting in investigating such a complaint will not be adversely affected in terms and conditions of employment, church

immediately after a report has been made, if civil authorities allow such communication. Often pastors are advised that any contact with principals may affect the investigation. The Pastor's objective will be to encourage candor, cooperation with CPS, and maintenance of church relationships through the ensuing process. Reported persons should be asked to stop any of their ministerial duties until the concern is resolved. The Pastor will follow insurance guidelines in this matter.

When the alleged abuse occurs within the ministries of St. Sanctuary Church, whether the alleged perpetrator is staff or lay, the Pastor will report the situation to the _____ (governing board) and church insurance company immediately. The pastor also will notify the denominational authorities as soon as allegations of abuse are received and keep those authorities aware of the congregation's actions throughout the process, up to and including the final resolution of the situation.

- If the concern relates to situations internal to the church (such as abuse on the campus, sexual harassment, inappropriate behavior by a volunteer, or other serious complaint), convene the Response Team.

A Response Team with no fewer than three members, at least one male and one female, will be called together by the pastor or _____ (lay leader) from the members previously appointed by the _____ (governing body). The Team will familiarize itself with the terms of this policy and will follow these procedures of St. Sanctuary Church for dealing with a complaint or alleged sexual exploitation, sexual harassment, or other forms of harassment. Other forms of harassment include discrimination, exploitation, or intimidation based on race, age, sexual orientation, gender identity, socioeconomic status, or physical ability.

If a volunteer or staff person is accused of inappropriate behavior, he or she may be suspended until an investigation is complete.

The Response Team will assure that one of several approaches are taken to address the complaint or concern:

1. The complainant can attempt to resolve the matter directly with the respondent (the individual accused of abuse, exploitation or harassment).
2. The complainant can report the incident to a pastor, in an effort to resolve the matter informally.
3. If an informal resolution of the complaint does not seem wise, appropriate, possible, or does not succeed, the complainant may request that the Response Team institute formal proceedings which shall include the following steps:
 - a. The Response Team shall advise the Senior Minister, Moderator, and Vice Moderator of the receipt of all complaints and shall keep them apprised of ongoing steps and actions taken. If the Senior Minister, Moderator, or Vice Moderator is the subject of the complaint, the Response Team shall notify those who are not the subject of the complaint. NOTE: If a clergyperson is the subject

of the complaint, the mater will be immediately reports to the _____ (regional judicatory).

- b. The Response Team shall gather statements or other information from the individuals involved in the alleged exploitation or harassment, including the respondent (the subject of the complaint), and from others who may have pertinent information, such as qualified professional consultants, and present such information to the respondent's supervisor and supervisory body (i.e., Ministerial Relations Committee, Board of Church Ministries, etc.).
- c. The respondent's supervisory body, or an appropriate subcommittee thereof,¹ shall make determinations and take actions appropriate to resolve the matter. These may include:
 - i. Finding that exploitation or harassment did not occur.
 - ii. Finding that exploitation or harassment has occurred, and that the appropriate body of the church is called upon to take action accordingly. Such action may include one or more of the following:
 - A formal reprimand, with defined expectations for changed behavior;
 - Recommending or requiring psychological or psychiatric assessment, counseling and/or treatment;
 - Probationary standing, with the terms of the probation clearly defined;
 - Dismissal from employment or authorized volunteer leadership position, and, in extreme cases, terminating affiliation with, or membership in, the church.
- d. The Response Team may seek the advice of legal counsel or others to advise it in performing its functions.

c.

In determining whether alleged conduct constitutes harassment or exploitation, consideration shall be given to the record of the alleged incident(s) as a whole and to the totality of the circumstances, including the context in which the alleged incident(s) occurred.

If the complainant or respondent is not satisfied with the disposition of the matter by the respondent's supervisory body, he or she has the right to appeal to the President/Warden/Stated Clerk/Moderator or to the Vice President/Warden/Stated Clerk/Moderator if the President/Warden/Stated Clerk/Moderator is the subject of the complaint, who shall refer the matter to the _____(governing body). The subject of any such appeal to the _____(governing body) shall be limited solely to whether the procedures of this policy were followed. The matter will not be reconsidered on the merits, and the decision of

¹ The determination could also be made by the Senior Pastor and the Response Team.

the ____ (governing body) will be the final resolution of the matter. If the ____ (governing body) determines that the procedures of this policy were not followed, it will refer the matter back to the respondent's supervisory body to complete the processing of the complaint in accordance with these procedures.

A written summary of the Response Team's proceedings will be maintained and protected from anyone without a legitimate right or need to know.

- c. Adequate care must be shown for the well-being of victims, the accused and families involved. Situations must be handled forthrightly with due respect for the individuals' privacy and confidentiality. Accusatory attitudes and statements should be avoided. No victims should be blamed in any way, nor should their stories be minimized.
- d. A spokesperson may be selected to report to the church board on the response process (to avoid secrecy while protecting the confidentiality of all parties). The senior pastor, or his/her designee, is the only person(s) authorized to make statements to representatives of the media. All requests for statements should be directed to the senior pastor.