

Advice to workers from professing psychotherapist – April 2023

To Our Workers:

As you may be aware, “There are few moments in ministry that matter more than how we respond to someone who discloses to us that they have been sexually abused..”
[*Understanding Sexual Abuse: A Guide For Ministry Leaders & Survivors*, by Tim Hein, (2018)
p. 57-58]

And perhaps you, like most others, are having to respond extemporaneously. We pray that you will have the needed strength and wisdom, but even so, these situations require some psychological information that I’m sending in case you don’t have it.

Survivors are substantially re-traumatized when disclosure is mishandled. ..Mr. Hein’s book mentions 3 words: Listen, believe, and [I’d add, to respectfully and humbly] acknowledge. I would also add this: *Maintain a tone that helps them to feel safe to talk.* **There is nothing for you to defend or prove in that moment.** You can always circle back around with questions at a later time, but those three words are important to employ in the moment.

Whoever is calling you has already spent weeks, months, years, huge portions of their life wrangling with their experience—or that of their precious child. This may be the first time they’ve even said the words. Calling you may well be the single bravest thing they’ve ever done. They are feeling embarrassed, vulnerable, exposed. They are usually going to be needing

- 1) reassurance that you believe them and to see that you take them seriously,
- 2) to know what their options are—*legal* and *mental health* (and as you know, child and adult options differ), and
- 3) to see what you are going to do moving forward (prevention). I don’t pretend to know what that is, but please offer something.

You do not need to (and perhaps shouldn’t) counsel them. Your role is to **believe them and resource them.** (Some resources are listed in my last email, if needed.)

Here are some examples of what they need to hear:

“I believe you. / It took a lot of courage to tell me about this.”

“I’m sorry this happened. / This shouldn’t have happened to you.”

The last topic I will mention is regarding perpetrator protection. Again, I don’t know if this has happened recently, but it has happened many, many times. No one coming forward to disclose should have to be questioned about what happens to their abuser. *They have already spent way too much time considering that.* Moreover, what happens to a perpetrator is between him and God and the law. No one reporting abuse is responsible for that. In addition, research has historically shown that a pedophile’s re-offence, relapse and recidivism rates are fairly high (and I understand that not all sexual abusers of children are pedophiles).

Given that information, many survivors and others are distraught by abusers returning to our gatherings where kids will be. Many I can readily think of have stopped going to meetings because of being unwilling to risk this exposure. Please, please do not make decisions that would continue to protect perpetrators. These people are so deceptive/charming/manipulative that it’s hard to believe they’d re-offend. And maybe even they don’t think they will. Until they do. Even after therapy. And please, please make sure they **do not** return to our gatherings where there are kids.

My hope is that you will read this email in the spirit I’ve intended.. to support your healthy intentions and offer some practical professional suggestions, in case you don’t already have them.

I hope that you are holding up well.

Suzanne Thompson

(NC Psychotherapist)

p.s. I also strongly recommend the book I quoted above. The author was also abused as a child—as many ministers have been, perhaps even your peers, or those on your staff, or even you—and has done an excellent job of offering resources, examples, and self-disclosure in an organized, compassionate way.