



CONNECT CSA Faith Collaborative ***Preventing Child Sexual Abuse: Organizing Tips for Churches***

About Us

We are a diverse group of faith leaders who have worked together over the last year and a half to talk about, learn about, think and feel through the issue of child sexual abuse in our lives, the lives of our congregations, our churches and communities. We come from a variety of perspectives and experiences. Some of us are survivors of child sexual abuse, some of us are pastors, one of us is a Christian ethicist, another a seminarian, several of us also work in non profit organizations; all of us are people of faith who care deeply about preventing child sexual abuse.

With funding from the Ms. Foundation for Women, the CONNECT CSA Faith Collaborative has hosted community conversations across New York City with youth groups, seminarians, pastors and congregants in diverse faith settings to talk openly about people's experiences with child sexual abuse and what we can do together to prevent it.

What we knew to be true was made even clearer by these conversations: child sexual abuse is an immense, terrible, deeply complicated and difficult problem in the lives of many people across all communities and denominations. We also witnessed that when the great stone of silence is rolled away, so many people emerge with wisdom, strength and faith-inspired resolve who want to be part of a movement to change the conditions that allow child sexual abuse to happen.

We have taken our learning and gathered it here. We used notes from our meetings and our community conversations to come up with some questions and ideas. We have also drawn on the work of other organizations, whom we have cited. There is so much that we have learned – some of it very elemental, some more complex, all must be tailored to the individual communities who seek it. There is no one-size-fits-all approach to organizing around this issue, but there are many important considerations, questions and deeper theological, cultural and denominational issues that each community can work through. We invite you to consider this as a work in progress. This is not an end product but part of a process and a journey we are all taking and discovering. We invite you to enter into this conversation with us.

Defining Child Sexual Abuse¹

The general Western definition of child sexual abuse (CSA) is: Non-consensual sexual activity that negatively impacts a person's psychological, physical, emotional, social and spiritual self.

- Child sexual abuse is any sexual violation experienced by someone under the age of eighteen.
- Child sexual abuse is an abuse of power—someone with more power using it to sexually abuse someone who is younger or under 18 and in a position of less power.
- Developmentally disabled children and adults are particularly vulnerable to sexual abuse, and are abused at twice the rate of non-disabled children and adults.

Child sexual abuse can include child pornography, sexual exposure/voyeurism, sexual exploitation, genital contact, penetration, sexual jokes, invasive hygienic practices, and more covert psychological and sexual preoccupations with a child. Importantly, it is not just the sexual behavior, but the combination of the sexual activity with the power imbalance that enables the abuse. Sexual abuse can be coerced or manipulated by many means: from building trust and a “loving relationship” to providing access to materials a child or young person needs or wants, to using force.

The vast majority of child sexual abuse happens in situations where the child trusts and/or is dependent upon the offender. Over 85 % of children know their abusers. Most sexual offenders cultivate some level of trust with the child to assure that they will comply and not tell. The culture of silence and fear around child sexual abuse, combined with the typical responses to trauma and the fact that a child would also have to talk about sex to talk about CSA, leaves the issue rarely addressed within families, our communities and the broader culture.

Child Sexual Abuse Happens Everywhere

Child sexual abuse happens in all racial, religious, ethnic and age groups, and at all socio-economic levels. Since children are abused in homes across the country, adults need to learn what makes children vulnerable, how to recognize warning signs of those who may be sexually abusing children and what to do if sexual abuse is suspected.

There is no such thing as a typical “sex offender.” People who sexually abuse children can be immediate or extended family members (fathers, mothers, stepparents, grandparents, siblings, uncles, aunts, cousins, etc.). They can be neighbors, babysitters, religious leaders, teachers, coaches, or anyone else who has close contact with children.

¹ There are a variety of definitions for child sexual abuse. We are using generationFIVE’s definition here. See www.generationfive.org.

Some Statistics:²

- Approximately one in three women (30-45 %) and one in six men (13-16 %) report being sexually abused as children.
- The Centers for Disease Control (CDC) estimates that over 300,000 children are sexually abused each year in this country.
- The majority of children who are sexually abused never tell.
- Nearly everyone knows someone who has been sexually abused, knows an offender, or has been affected by child sexual abuse.
- Studies show that 85-93% of the time children are abused by someone they know. Most are acquaintances but as many as 47% are family or extended family.
- Up to 50% of those who sexually abuse children are under the age of 18.
- 20-50% of adolescents who have sexually abused children were themselves victims of physical abuse and approximately 40-80% were victims of sexual abuse.

Importantly, children who abuse other children often have been victimized in some way themselves. Acknowledging and addressing the distress these children have already faced is a good way to help end this abusive cycle. Experts and parents agree that with specialized treatment these children can heal and diminish the risk for experiencing or inflicting further harm.

The Consequences are Devastating

The effects, scientifically documented and anecdotally related, are cyclical, chronic, debilitating, and sometimes fatal. Suicide attempts, depression, sexually transmitted diseases, self-mutilation, substance abuse, recurrent victimization, eating disorders, sleep disorders, gastrointestinal illness, abusive sexual and intimate relationships, increased risk of imprisonment, increased likelihood to be involved with sex work: these are some of the outcomes of denied, unaddressed child sexual abuse. Insidious and soul wounding, the pain does not end with the physical experience. Instead, it leaves an indelible emotional and neurological imprint.³

² These statistics are taken from Stop It Now!, www.stopitnow.org; Darkness to Light, www.d2l.org; 1 in 6, www.1in6.org; and generationFIVE, www.generationfive.org.

³ See Ms. Foundation for Women report, *Beyond Surviving: Toward a Movement to Prevent Child Sexual Abuse*, which can be found by typing the title in the search engine at www.forwomen.org.

WHERE DO WE START?!

What can our church do to prevent child sexual abuse, help survivors and grow a healthy congregation?

Talk About It, Talk About It, Talk About It

Silence around child sexual abuse is one of the greatest obstacles for healing and prevention. In fact, abusers rely on our silence. By denying or keeping silent about the existence of child sexual abuse in our homes, communities and churches, we send the message that it is ok. *When we are silent, we collude with suffering and injustice.*

It is not easy to break the silence. Where do we start? One of the most important ways that a church can begin to address the prevalence of child sexual abuse in our society is by bearing witness in worship and preaching, in Bible studies, adult, youth and children's ministries; in each and every aspect of the churches programming.

When the door is opened, when the church begins to address child sexual abuse, congregants' stories will come. The more people are able to tell the truth about their experiences and those of their loved ones, the clearer it will become that child sexual abuse is not only about individuals, but pervades our families and churches.

In addition to bearing witness, the church must also provide sanctuary. Congregants will need a safe environment within which to tell their stories. This can mean creating a special survivors group, setting up referrals for working with outside therapists and/or survivors groups, creating a pastoral care team consisting of lay people who have experience with trauma and abuse....and more. There will likely be people in your congregation who have gone through extensive treatment and healing who can help guide this process as well.

Here are some suggestions about how to talk about child sexual abuse:

- Include stories or references to child sexual abuse in pastoral prayers, prayers for the people.
- Preach about child sexual abuse. Try different formats. For example, create a sermon series with facilitated discussion groups that have a sermon talk-back component.⁴
- Invite guest preachers/speakers who have spoken on this issue.

⁴ Two great resources for this are: McClure John S., and Nancy J. Ramsay eds., *Telling the Truth: Preaching About Sexual and Domestic Violence* (United Church Press, 1998) and www.faithtrustinstitute.org, where sermons are available.

- Create a Lenten series that deals directly with child sexual abuse: invite local experts to speak about signs, symptoms, consequences, and resources. Simultaneously offer a support team for survivors, perpetrators and bystanders.
- Support adult survivors by offering special groups/opportunities for discussion/referral.
- Create parent-specific forums that include information on child sexual abuse domestic violence, sexuality.
- Create Bible studies that address family violence.

“In order to have conversations about child sexual abuse, you have to have trust and relationship in your community.” ~Community Conversation Participant

Be a Church Where Children are Honored

Children must be seen and heard. What many adults have inherited from their own childhood is a tradition of devaluing children – making children feel like they don’t matter – not nurturing their whole selves, and denying that they have a place in the adult world. But we understand today that children thrive when they are given a safe space within which to express themselves and explore their relationship with God.

Children are a huge part of our congregations and the future of the church. Many adult survivors attest that while the abuse was awful, one of the most damaging aspects of child sexual abuse was when their experience was denied, dismissed, or silenced. Creating a church where children are honored recognizes that children have the right to live and thrive in their minds, hearts and bodies unencumbered by abuse. Children who are honored understand that they have the right to speak up when something is wrong, that they will be listened to and that adults will take appropriate action.

- **Sunday School curriculum:** Does the curriculum support child-honoring? Does it include any healthy sexuality component? Does it recognize that children are whole selves – mind, heart and body? Do children have a voice in the life of the church? Where? How?⁵
- **Sunday School teachers and youth ministry staff:** Are all staff required to undergo a background check? Do teachers and youth staff go through thorough, updated training that includes boundary awareness?

⁵Resources: www.dovesnest.net/circleofgrace, www.faithtrustinstitute.org

- **Policies and procedures for working with children:** Are there specific guidelines for keeping kids safe? Are there guidelines for protecting children’s bodily integrity? For example, rules about accompanying children to the bathroom? Are there basic guidelines around physical space? Such as all Sunday school doors remain open and no adult is permitted to leave the premises with a child/children without expressed parental permission.
- **Obedience:** Consider the role of obedience in the beliefs and life of the congregation and its families. How is authority understood? Is strict obedience an expectation of the church? Are children expected to be seen and not heard? How is the 4th commandment taught? Consider ways in which “honor thy mother and father” and the value placed on obedience to authority might be harmful in light of child sexual abuse. For example, do children get the message that they are supposed to do whatever the Deacon says, even if it feels scary or wrong? Consider ways of cultivating children’s sense of their own inner authority, and teaching obedience in light of self-care and protection. Likewise consider the role of corporal punishment. Is hitting (spanking) an accepted way for parents in the community to discipline children?⁶
- **Consider scripture** such as Mathew 19:14, Mark 10:14, Luke 18:16 – how does your church interpret these texts? Consider how Jesus’ view of children or other scripture might ground your efforts to create a child-honoring church.
- Read Raffi’s, “A Covenant for Honouring Children.” Think about your own and your church’s regard of children in light of it.⁷

Training and Education

Many of us feel we do not have the understanding, tools or language to address child sexual abuse. Or we just don’t know how to make the changes we seek. Training is an essential element of any prevention effort because it not only teaches, it gets the conversations going, enables people to get on the same page about how to proceed and builds trust and relationship among community members.

Different aspects of training should be considered or even different trainings geared toward different aspects of child sexual abuse. Our conversation participants specifically

⁶ Recommended reading: Sheila Redmond “Christian ‘Virtues’ and Recovery from Child Sexual Abuse” in Joanne Carlson & Bohn, Carol R. eds. *Christianity Patriarchy and Abuse: A Feminist Critique*. (New York: Pilgrim Press, 1989) and Alice Miller, *For Your Own Good: Hidden Cruelty in Child-Rearing and the Roots of Violence* (NY: Farrar Straus and Giroux, 1983); James Poling, *The Abuse of Power: A Theological Problem*. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1991)

⁷ See Centre for Child Honouring: <http://www.childhonouring.org/covenantprinciples.html>

wanted “accountability training” – ways to deal with suspected abusers and “parenting training” – ways for parents to address child sexual abuse, how to model appropriate behavior and understanding power dynamics in families. Your congregation’s training needs will be specific, but effective training should be comprehensive and include:

- **Specific training** on child sexual abuse, child abuse and neglect, domestic violence, sexual assault, and sexual harassment for clergy, adult and youth leaders and Sunday school teachers in all your churches ministries. This training should be *yearly and mandatory* for all new employees. This is not training you do once every 3 – 5 years. Commitment to child sexual abuse prevention demands ongoing training and education.
- **Parenting education.** Becoming a parent doesn’t automatically translate into good parenting! Offering comprehensive and ongoing parenting education that includes specific training on child sexual abuse, child abuse and neglect, and domestic violence is an important component in protecting children and keeping families healthy and safe. Good parenting education will include critical information about ages and stages of child development, skill building around communication, discipline, and empathy. Because we live in a society so inured to abuse, it is important that parents understand clearly what constitutes abuse and neglect and are fully aware of the effects and consequences of its many manifestations (including domestic violence).
- **Parent support.** Parents need nonjudgmental and supportive spaces where they can speak openly and honestly about the challenges they face and explore how their own childhood experience shapes their present parenting style and relationships with their children. Creating opportunities for parents to support each other in the context of faith can contribute to making families safer and healthier and the church a true sanctuary. This kind of space is especially important for parents who are survivors of child sexual abuse or those who are grappling with the sexual abuse of a child.

*“Training brings light and understanding – like Scripture – to an issue.”
~Community Conversation participant*

Implement a Positive Sexuality Curriculum

The silence around child sexual abuse is caused in part because it deals with sex and sexuality and very few congregations talk about sexuality. One of the ways to understand and prevent child sexual abuse is by equipping adults, youth and children with the words to talk about what has happened or what is happening with their bodies and their

understanding of relationships. Many congregations still associate the body and sexual desire with sin. Yet, sex and sexuality are an inherent part of our existence.

A positive sexuality curriculum addresses physical and emotional boundaries, power dynamics and understanding when your body is signaling that something is wrong. For adults or youth who have been abused, positive sexuality education enables them to move through shame associated with the abuse by giving them a framework for understanding why and how the abuse did not represent a healthy, mutual, sexual relationship or dynamic and how it damaged their understanding of themselves.

- Implement a positive sexuality curriculum. You do not have to re-invent the wheel on this, several denominations have created excellent curricula that you can use and/or tailor to your churches needs.⁸

Create a Child Sexual Abuse Prevention Policy

We have heard from churches whose first conversations about child sexual abuse occurred after a registered sex offender either wanted to join their church or was discovered within the church. What these churches have said is that the time to think about child sexual abuse, talk about it and create policies to ensure safety for the children is not *after* such an incident occurs, but right now.

What we know about the prevalence of child sexual abuse is that abuse or its fall-out is occurring right now in the lives of congregants and elsewhere in your community. We also know that it is not the person who has been caught already who poses the most threat, but adults and youth in our everyday lives who are abusing children they know in their families and communities.

Creating a written policy sets down the church's understanding of the issue, where it fits into the church's mission and ministry and provides clear guidelines for congregants' behavior. The policy is only one aspect of a church's overall child sexual abuse prevention program, however, and must be supported by teaching, preaching, training and community engagement.

- Form a committee, but engage the whole congregation. Begin by holding conversations and including as many congregants as is feasible. Congregants who go through the process of doing the necessary research, conversation and creation of a policy will become educated about the issue and be more likely to become advocates of other church-wide changes.

⁸ See sexuality education curricula at The Religious Institute, www.religiousinstitute.org/issue/sexuality-education and Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice, www.rcrc.org/issues/sexuality_edu.cfm.

- What does God/Jesus/the Bible have to say about child sexual abuse? Think theologically about why your particular church feels it is important to move forward with this. Grounding your understanding in your faith tenets reminds everyone why it is essential.
- Look at your denominational statement on child sexual abuse.
- Check out what other churches have done, both in your denomination and outside of it.
- Using the work of other churches and available research, craft a statement that is unique to your church and your congregation, using language that is fitting and understandable for everyone.
- Create a unique policy. Again, using other work as a guide, create a policy that fits with your church. Remember that it is meant to guide and set perimeters around behavior that is appropriate to maintaining a healthy, safe environment where children are honored. A policy is only one aspect of the work to prevent child sexual abuse.⁹
- Make sure the church is knowledgeable about local resources for anyone struggling with the consequences of child sexual abuse -- whether their own, their children's, a close friend or member of extended family as either victim/survivor or abuser. Once the church breaks the silence and it feels safe to talk about child sexual abuse, be prepared for some unexpected disclosures.

“Ongoing education around child sexual abuse, child safety and healthy sexuality ought be built into the churches ministry so that policy is just the backbone of a larger understanding of the issues.” ~ CONNECT Faith CSA Collaborative Member

Understand that Child Sexual Abuse is a Social Justice Issue

We understand child sexual abuse to be a social justice issue. As with other forms of oppression, it is about the abuse of power and control over someone who is less empowered, vulnerable and reliant on others for their basic needs. An adult, teen, or another child wields a level of power and control over a younger, less empowered child in order to manipulate the child sexually. While abuse is perpetrated by individuals, the

⁹ For examples see, “An ECLA Strategy for Responding to Sexual Abuse in the Church,” www.elca.org/safeplace; *Safe Sanctuaries: A Child Abuse Prevention Policy*, Harrisburg United Methodist Church. Email: humc@harrisburgumc.com.

factors that create and enable abuse expand far beyond individual personalities or circumstances. This is made especially clear when we consider that despite efforts to heal individual survivors and punish individual offenders, child sexual abuse continues relatively unabated.

The confounding truth is that child sexual abuse has been in existence for centuries with trauma, familial and social practices passed on from generation to generation. For too many of us, child sexual abuse is covertly built into the very fabric of our families, communities and social systems. To prevent it, we must be willing to see, understand and deeply challenge the most essential aspects of our human interactions and the ways in which we have sanctioned, ignored or denied violence and oppression. It also means seeing and understanding how other forms of systemic violence and oppression such as sexism, homophobia, racism, classism and others are related and interdependent. The imbalance of power at the core of child sexual abuse is inherent to all forms of injustice. Furthermore, the ways in which families and communities experience child sexual abuse is simultaneously shaped by the complex web of oppressions with which they must contend on a daily basis.

“Systems of oppression and child sexual abuse have an interdependent relationship: a power-over system that benefits some at the expense of others and uses violence [and] creates the conditions for child sexual abuse (i.e. gender inequality, class exploitation, racism, violence and threat for difference). [In turn the prevalence of child sexual abuse fosters behaviors (obedience to authority, silence, disempowerment, shame) that prevent people from organizing effectively to work for liberation, healing and [to]change systemic forms of violence.” ~generationFIVE

Child sexual abuse is a fundamental attack on human dignity, safety and trust. Our work as people of faith in communities of faith begins with recognizing individual survivors and abuse, and this is very important. It also must go beyond that. Because of the enormity and complexity of child sexual abuse in our communities and its profound reliance on silencing victim/survivors, prevention efforts require an approach that looks deeply at the ways in which abuse and oppression are systematized. Abuse does not occur in a vacuum, in isolation, but is created and perpetuated by our social, cultural, religious and familial histories and injustices.

- Begin by taking a look at the generationFIVE website. generationFIVE is a secular, Oakland-based organization that has pioneered this vision and understanding. Visit www.generationfive.org/csa.php.
- Another good resource is the Ms. Foundation’s *Beyond Surviving: Toward a Movement to Prevent Child Sexual Abuse*. You can find this on their website, forwomen.org by typing the document name in their search function.
- Consider ways of incorporating and understanding child sexual abuse in your current social justice missions and programming.

Feel the Hope, Strength and Love

It is very easy to get overwhelmed by the issue of child sexual abuse. Not only is it emotionally volatile, life altering and heart-breaking; to address it can seem daunting. Yet, at the heart of the matter is love. Our desire to protect our children and ourselves from violence is rooted in love. And at the heart of this love is God's love for us. We honor God's love by loving each other and working to break out of dangerous and traumatic cycles of behavior. When we consider the strength and resilience of the children who have survived abuse (ourselves included), we can remember that there is strength and hope. Wounds can heal, so long as they are given ample attention. Becoming a church that takes on the prevention of child sexual abuse is a hopeful process that recognizes that in the face of pain and struggle, God offers strength, resilience and healing.

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