

Safe Church Resources

Safe Church and Ministers A Discussion Guide

Following each of the first three segments of the video, please pause and gather in groups of six or eight for discussion. Allow everyone who wants to participate to have time to share thoughts and feelings. Make sure that everyone understands that no one is expected to share. Anyone uncomfortable participating in a small group discussion is free to leave the room for a few minutes.

Questions, Part 1:

How did hearing Michelle's story make you feel?

How is Michelle's story like other stories you have heard?

Have you considered that Michelle's story can happen in churches today? How widespread do you think clergy sexual misconduct is?

Victim, survivor, and thriver are terms used by those who have experienced sexual abuse in describing themselves. Some people who have lived through abuse describe their journey as uneven, sometimes moving forward and sometimes backward in recovery. What was your response to the terms: victim, survivor, and thriver? What other terms might be appropriate for people who experienced abuse?

Questions, Part 2:

How did you feel hearing Sally's story?

After hearing Sally's story, why do you think victims often hesitate to report clergy abuse?

Questions, Part 3:

What did you hear that you never knew before?

What alarms you about what you heard?

The National Sexual Violence Resource Center reports that one in five women (20% of all women) and one in 71 men will be raped at some point in their lives. Sexual abuse is a widespread experience in our culture. Clergy sexual abuse research tells us that 4% of women in United States who attend church regularly have had a church leader make a sexual advance toward them after age eighteen. How do you wrestle with that information in light of your own church membership?



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What are some steps that you are willing to take after hearing this information? How are you willing to help make your church a safe space?

Definitions

Victim – someone affected by sexual violence or sexual abuse.

Survivor – one who was violated in the past and has gone through the recovery process. Also refers to those who deal with long-lasting effects of sexual violence

Thrivor – one who has moved beyond the trauma of sexual abuse and are living in their recovery.

Perpetrator – the person responsible for harmful, illegal, or immoral sexual advances, whether verbal or physical.

Harassment – a range of activities, including unwanted and uninvited verbal or physical behavior of a sexual nature, especially by a person in authority toward a subordinate.

Clergy Sexual Misconduct – when ministers, priests, rabbis, or other clergy persons or religious leaders make sexual advances or propositions to persons in the congregations they serve who are not their spouses or significant others.

Grooming – a patterned behavior designed to increase opportunities for sexual abuse, minimize victim resistance or withdrawal, and reduce disclosure or belief. Possible examples include handshakes, prolonged hugs, and unwanted conversations.

Predator – one who seeks and plans to commit sexual abuse. Ministers may use their position to manipulate and intimidate.

Wanderer – one who would not normally seek out a sexual relationship with a church member. Abuse by the wanderer occurs as a release from stressful situations or life crises.

Lover – one who is not motivated by the conquest to abuse, nor is seeking to satisfy inadequacy. Lovers are convinced that they are in love with a church member and may develop sexual feelings for that church member and be unwilling to discuss those feelings with a mentor or a friend.

Factors Contributing to Clergy Sexual Abuse:

- Heightened stress in the ministerial role
- Lack of training about clergy sexual abuse
- Absence of enforced guidelines for sexual ethics and clergy misconduct

Clergy Sexual Abuse Environment Factors:

- Presumed safety and absolute trust often assigned to churches and ministers
- Existence of a “niceness culture” within churches
- Unsupervised ministers with no accountability within the church

Four percent of women in the United States who attend church regularly have, since the age of eighteen, experienced a sexual advance by a church leader.



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