

Episcopal Survivors Network

FACT SHEET: ABUSE IN THE EPISCOPAL CHURCH

What is abuse?

Abuse is any conduct that degrades, humiliates, intimidates or diminishes another person. It can take many forms, including physical, sexual, spiritual, relational, emotional, financial and other conduct. It may involve exclusion, gossip, bullying, misuse of power, corrupt practices, or retaliation. Depending on the severity of the behavior involved, abuse can be a single incident, or an ongoing pattern of misconduct.

Abuse may be based on a variety of factors, from race and ethnicity, to sexual orientation or expression, to interpersonal conflict.

Abuse is always wrong. It is never justified.

What happens when abuse occurs?

Abuse inevitably damages the perpetrator, the victim, the church, society, and bystanders. Churches or dioceses in which abuse has been ignored or covered up may suffer from unhealthy relationships and hidden trauma for generations to come. Addressing these issues is rarely successful without outside help, as it can be difficult to understand and process the underlying dynamics.

Why is it important to address abuse?

Not only is abuse an egregious violation of the baptismal covenant, but environments in which abuse is normative often provide opportunities for more egregious abuse, including sexual and physical abuse. Abuse exists along a continuum and includes a wide variety of behaviors.

Is The Episcopal Church good at handling abuse?

Not at all. Despite efforts beginning in the 1970's to address sexual abuse, even egregious cases of sexual misconduct often are badly handled. Typically, this takes the form of ignoring church canons, protecting the organization, and ignoring or demonizing the victim.

The church is even worse when it comes to non-sexual abuse. Spiritual abuse is routinely ignored or brushed off by judicatories. Additionally, complaints of harassment frequently result in silence, dismissal out of hand, or claims that the complainant is being abusive by complaining. Many victims of abuse also complain about receiving officious "Notices of Dismissal" from church officials, without the pastoral response required by church canons.

What happens when The Episcopal Church mishandles complaints of abuse?

Mishandling of complaints is a violation of the baptismal covenant and typically causes lasting and irreparable harm to the reputations of all involved. Victims often leave organized faith altogether. Studies repeatedly show that even bystanders are harmed when abuse occurs.

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Everyone in my church is so friendly and welcoming. How could abuse be an issue for us?

Friendly is not the same as faithful. In fact, a seemingly friendly church may have a narcissistic culture in which friendship and acceptance are predicated on conformity to the wishes of entrenched groups. These may include clergy, vestry members, long-time parishioners, altar guilds, or choirs. In such cases, failure to conform with the wishes of insiders may result in exclusion or shunning, even as established church members view their church as friendly and welcoming. In such cases, exclusion of persons who criticize the parish, its clergy or leaders is itself a form of abuse.

What can I do about abuse?

The best way to address abuse is to be an ally. That means:

- Being informed by recognizing abuse in all its forms.
- Recognizing that abuse affects everyone. In the Body of Christ, there is no, "I'm not taking sides," or "I don't want to get involved."
- Advocating for a safe church for all persons.
- Listening with respect and compassion if someone complains of abuse. Studies show the overwhelming majority of complainants are truthful, so it's important to believe victims.
- Avoiding defensive responses. Telling victims they are out of line is a huge mistake and shuts down all communication. In such cases it is all but impossible to restore trust and communication.
- Avoiding "the big brush-off." Things like, "We're moving on," or "I can't get into that now," or "take me off your email list," do no one any favors.
- Thinking for yourself. Avoid prejudging situations based on what you've heard, or what another clergy person may have told you. Just because someone has a reputation for criticizing the church does not mean they have not been abused.
- Avoiding justifying behavior like, "That's just John. He gets that way," or "He's just in a bad mood. Tomorrow it will be someone else's turn."
- Acting if you see possible abuse. That may mean speaking out, seeking the help of others, or reaching outside your parish or diocese for help.
- Adopting policies to prevent all forms of abuse, not just sexual abuse.
- Understanding and following church canons and policies on abuse and misconduct, versus ignoring them because a complaint has been dismissed, or based on a secondhand understanding of the situation. Tremendous damage is done when church officials ad lib their response to abuse or fail to fully understand the situation.
- Seeking outside help when needed. Bishops, priests and other church officials are often too close to a situation to fully understand it, and may be conflicted in their role as pastor to the clergy in their diocese versus the need to care for victims.
- Being transparent. Christians are called to bring light to the darkness, but they cannot do so when everything is hidden behind claims of confidentiality. In such cases, trauma typically moves underground, where it festers, only to emerge years, sometimes decades later.
- Letting people know you care. If someone you know has been abused, it's never wrong to touch base and let them know you care.