

5 CONSIDERATIONS TO PREPARE YOUR ORGANIZATION TO ADDRESS KNOWN OR FUTURE CONCERNS AROUND SEXUAL ABUSE AND HARASSMENT

Many faith communities across the spectrum are taking a breath and asking themselves hard questions after this week's release of the investigative report into the Southern Baptist Convention's Executive Committee conducted by Guidepost. Sexual abuse and harassment are not unfamiliar issues for either private or public organizations. While we detail a long list of recommendations specific to our investigation in our report titled, "[The Southern Baptist Convention Executive Committee's Response to Sexual Abuse Allegations and an Audit of the Procedures and Actions of the Credentials Committee](#)," the following considerations are meant to be a helpful tool as faith environments consider how to handle known or future concerns around sexual abuse and harassment.

1. **Have a Public Reporting Mechanism.** While many corporate environments have employed this tool, some faith communities have been slow to do so. Having a well-known and publicized reporting tool among staff and congregants is a way to ensure you are well informed of any issues as they develop. Nothing is worse than reading about an allegation of abuse by a staff or congregation member on a social media page before you even have a chance to understand the circumstances. Making an online confidential reporting mechanism or phone number available for concerns in either true name and/or anonymously is now a basic expectation on the part of organizations. Churches, temples, ministries, denominations, or groupings of individual congregations can team together to share the costs.
2. **Be Responsive.** You can no longer wait to consider how things shake out. You must be responsive if you have any allegation of inappropriate behavior especially on the part of a staff member. Of critical importance is knowing your state's^[1] mandatory requirements for the reporting of any child sexual abuse allegations. If your state's statute identifies your position as a mandatory

reporter, you can be held accountable if you do not report in a timely manner and in accordance with the law. With allegations regarding staff and others under your governance, you will be judged by your timeliness in responding. This may involve some limited and discrete investigation internal to your organization. Make sure anyone you speak to and any decision you make is documented so that if you are called into question, you can articulate sound decision making. Unless you have special and relevant training in the area of abuse, reach out for help. Some denominations have resources and there are a number of faith communities who have lived and learned some hard lessons in this area. In the end, seeking outside professionals is a good decision if the allegation could result in significant impact to your organization.

3. **Vet and Train Your Staff.** In faith communities, we commonly see a heavy reliance on personal referrals. While of course references are great ways to identify potential new hires, it cannot replace comprehensive and documented vetting. Each new hire should undergo a criminal and civil background check, an employment check and more, as well as a search of the National Sex Offender Public Website.^[2] Reviews of social media accounts for any inappropriate content is also a must. We continue to see people post questionable content on their social media while their organizations are totally unaware. As part of any onboarding for new staff, they should be clear about behavioral expectations and be presented and trained to the organization's Code of Conduct and policies and procedures (which must address Sexual Abuse and Harassment matters) and the reporting of any concerning behavior. We recommend a yearly review of these policies and procedures with staff signing an acknowledgement as part of any onboarding as well.
4. **Listen and Learn.** There are numerous avenues for faith environments to learn about sexual abuse and harassment. There have been significant initiatives including the Caring Well Initiative^[3] which has worked to educate church leaders as to these topics. There are numerous training resources available and faith communities across the spectrum are embracing lessons learned from others. An important part of the learning process is being able to sit and listen. This is not a comfortable topic for many but giving reporters and survivors a safe place to tell their stories and respect while they do it, is imperative to any healthy process. Without it, the path to recovery is much longer and harder.
5. **Get Help When You Need It.** As we have previously stated, the topic of sexual abuse and harassment is hard. It deals with wounded people and often very unhealthy organizations. Having access to the right people outside your organization that you can honestly confer with is a must. Trauma informed consultants who can effectively listen to and provide support to reporting parties and survivors can assist the organization with better understanding not only the facts but the underlying weaknesses which may have allowed for the environment. Having an already identified third party ready to answer your call is an important step to getting your organization well prepared to appropriately address any allegations of inappropriate behavior, harassment, or abuse.

[1] The term state also includes the District of Columbia, the 5 major U.S. Territories and federally recognized Indian tribes.

[2] <https://www.nsopw.gov/>

[3] <https://www.caringwell.com/challenge/train/>



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