

Maintaining boundaries – specifics to be aware of in Christian Ministry

Sexual abuse (which includes any form of harassment or exploitation) occurs when any person in a leadership position uses the trust placed in them to cross a boundary and satisfy a sexual need or desire.

Sexual abuse can include **physical** contact from the person in the position of trust (pastor, leader, other church worker, etc), these are boundary violations such as:

- sexual and 'accidental' touch of sexual areas of the body
- unwanted physical contact, such as tickling and playful aggression that makes a person feel uncomfortable
- a prolonged hug when a brief hug is customary behaviour
- kissing on the lips when a kiss on the cheek would be appropriate
- pressing up against someone inappropriately
- an inappropriate gift (such as lingerie, pornography) from persons in positions of trust
- explicit sexual touch

Sexual abuse can also include **verbal** behaviour initiated by a person in a position of trust when such behaviour sexualises a relationship. Examples include:

- sexually oriented humour or behaviour
- repeated unwelcome requests for social contact
- questions about intimate details of someone's relationships
- tales of the leaders sexual exploits
- looking for sympathy because of the sexual inadequacies of the leader's wife or husband

Sexual abuse can also include **non-verbal behaviour** such as:

- prolonged gazing or staring at sexual areas of the body

It is normal for people to seek support, comfort or counselling at difficult times in life. At any point, but especially in such times of vulnerability, it is wrong for any form of sexual contact to occur. Sexual contact within a relationship in which one of the persons holds a position of trust is a violation not only of the relationship and of Christian ethics, it is a violation of trust. There is a difference in power between that person and a member of the congregation. The difference in power means that even if the person goes along with this they are not equally responsible for what occurs.

It is always the leaders responsibility to establish and maintain boundaries regardless of the circumstances.

Indicators that boundaries might have been crossed.

- A person feels unsure, uncomfortable and confused with an interaction, even if they are initially flattered by a leader who wants to spend time with them.
- The person in a position of trust is spending significant time with the person and paying them an unusual amount of attention.
- A person is receiving personal gifts from a leader in a position of trust.
- Instead of offering support, comfort or counselling, the leader in a position of trust focuses on his or her own problems.
- A person receives invitations for intimate, social occasions.
- Touch occurs in a way that someone finds confusing, uncomfortable or upsetting.
- A spiritual rationale is given for inappropriate conduct, eg 'God has brought us together'.

A feature of abuse is secrecy

Some secrets are guilty secrets

Sexual abuse is often kept from notice by the abusive leader by appealing to secrecy. People need to know the difference between confidentiality and secrecy in relation to a person in a position of trust.

Confidentiality is something a person in a position of trust offers to a person for their own sake. The leader keeps confidences, so the person is free to share.

Secrecy is something a person in a position of trust demands from someone for the leader's sake. A person receiving the care is told to keep quiet.

Ask these questions:

Who is being protected by this secrecy?

Is this secret a guilty secret?