

Something to Talk About

A conversation guide for church leaders

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March 1, 2020

Abuse – About that Book You Probably Have Not Yet Read

One of my office bookshelves has a thirty-seven inch long array of books that I have not yet read. Yes, I measured it. Though I love to read, getting through my un-read books stack seems a daunting task. So, you can image how I felt when EFCA mailed to my home an unsolicited book that arrived a couple of days prior to the Theology Conference, February 5-7. *Becoming a Church that Cares Well for the Abused* didn't sound like a good read, but I dutifully took it along to read on my flight from Los Angeles to Chicago to attend the conference. After all, there was a preconference session on abuse in the church that was first thing on the schedule.

If you've read much about abuse in the church or had the terrible circumstance of dealing with it yourself, you know that when abuse surfaces, the most common reaction within the church is surprise. We just can't believe that it happened here or that this person would actually commit abuse. It's a surprise – but abuse is predictable. And though unpleasant, it's something to talk about.

One of my favorite speakers and authors during my policing years wrote and taught this – and it changed my view of the *actions* of leadership:

"Leaders are abnormal. They act contrary to their own human nature."¹

One way that leaders are abnormal is they do things that humans that don't lead do not do. One of those things is that they prepare for and work to prevent events that might happen but have not yet happened before they happen rather than reacting to them after they happen. Prevention is preferable to response.

Preparing our churches – the staff, leaders, congregants and ourselves – to prevent abuse as well as to respond to abuse after it has happened is abnormal. There are so many other things that we would prefer doing. But to effectively lead, it is necessary to have such plans in place and to follow them.

¹ *Challenging the Law Enforcement Organization, Proactive Leadership Strategies*, by Jack E. Enter (2006), p.47.

The hardest thing about actually doing something about abuse in our churches is just starting the conversation. Let me give you some conversation starters based upon the book and the half-day session at the EFCA Theology Conference on this topic.²

- Does our church have any policy regarding child safety, attendance of registered sex offenders or preventing or handling an allegation of abuse within the church? If yes, do those policies focus on response or do they also address prevention?
- Do our governance documents require two witnesses to act upon an allegation of sin or misconduct against an elder or pastor? How will we address one person's allegation of abuse (sexual or otherwise) that occurred in private? Are we really going to ignore their allegation and take no action because there are not two witnesses?
- Who will you ask to "look into" an allegation of abuse? Does that person have any competence in conducting that kind of investigation?
- What are your state's laws about mandatory reporting of abuse? Does everyone that needs to know about mandatory reporting know about it? If sued, how would you prove that mandatory reporters knew what to do? Will you only report abuses if mandated, or will you report them regardless of any mandate because the safety of potential victims outweighs the privacy of the offender?
- Have you ever thought about what an abuse survivor feels like every time the topic comes up in a church? How do we address that issue with love, grace and mercy toward the survivor in the church? For example, because of exposure to pornography years ago, every time I hear the word "pornography" images appear in my mind that I wish were not there and I relive the experience. How do abuse survivors feel when others talk about abuse? Have you ever had a conversation with a survivor of abuse from your church?
- When confronted with an issue or allegation of abuse, such as domestic violence, is our main focus on seeking the repentance and restoration of the offender or on the safety and care of the victim/survivor? Can the same person care for both?
- Do people in your church know how to report actual or suspected abuse? How would they know? One way to get the answer to this question is to ask several people and learn not only how they think reporting is to be done but also how they learned that.
- When we teach people about sexuality (especially adolescents, but also adults), do we emphasize maintaining purity rather than being respectful and having consent from the other?

Statistics indicate that many people in our churches have been victimized by abusers, whether within or outside the church and its programs and ministries. This is a bigger problem than we think it is. One reason we don't understand its scope is that we don't talk about it. But, it's something to talk about.

² Rev. Mike Sloan, Director of Safeguarding Certification at GRACE, Lynchburg, Virginia. Get more information at <https://netgrace.org/our-team>.

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If you received the book, please read it. It has a slew of useful tools and resources for you to use. If you didn't receive it, strongly consider finding it and reading it. Then do something with what you learned.

As always, I and the staff of EFCA West look forward to walking with you in your leadership journey. We'd love to talk about this with you, too.

Let us know if we can help and how your conversation goes.

Contact Bob Osborne by e-mail at bob.osborne@efca.org.

This is one of a series of articles intended to facilitate and guide church leaders' conversations about significant issues that often are not talked about among pastors, boards, and church leadership teams.

Prior articles can be found at <https://efcawest.efcadistrict.org/church-leadership/> or <https://efcawest.efcadistrict.org/something-to-talk-about-archives/>.