

Statement on Child Protection Policies and Caring for Survivors of Sexual Abuse

Sexual abuse is a terrible reality in our fallen world. Every year, more than 3 million reports of child abuse are made in the United States involving more than 6 million children.¹ Child sexual abuse is grievously widespread, with as many as 1 in 5 women and 1 in 10 men worldwide reporting being sexually abused as children.² The church of Christ is not exempt from child abuse. The sad prevalence of abuse means that child abuse constitutes an undeniable part of our lives and our churches. As Christ has made us one family in him, the church should relate to victims of abuse as part of our own immediate family.

Sexual abuse in any form is reprehensible. Such abuse is committed against people made in the very image of God, and therefore is a sin against God himself. Child sexual abuse is uniquely damaging, especially in light of Christ's command that we not hinder children from coming to him (Mark 10:14). Further, sexual abuse survivors often bear this heavy burden alone, commonly dealing with the effects of sexual abuse for the rest of their lives.

The gospel of Jesus and example of our Savior must shape our response to the reality of sexual abuse as we care for abuse survivors and seek to protect children in our churches. Christ willingly laid down his own life for his sheep to bring us to God and to bring us into his family, a place of safety for his children. Because of his death, resurrection, and rule, survivors of sexual abuse can find healing and the hope of certain justice in Christ. Therefore, the church and its shepherds are charged with imitating the Chief Shepherd:

Compassion: As a compassionate and loving Savior, Christ grieves at the effects of sin, and the church should grieve with anyone who has been a victim of such abuse (Romans 12:15).

Justice: As a just ruler, Christ hears the cries of the oppressed (Exodus 22:21–24) and delegates authority to government to punish evildoers and promote righteousness (Romans 13:4), and the church is to play its part in cooperating with God-given governmental authorities for the promotion of justice.

Healing: As the Great Physician, Christ heals us from sin and its terrible effects (Isaiah 53:4–5), and the church is called to be a place where every survivor of abuse may find hope and healing through the gospel of Jesus.

¹ U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Administration on Children, Youth and Families, Children's Bureau (2012). *Child Maltreatment 2011*.

² *Child Maltreatment* Fact Sheet. World Health Organization. <http://www.who.int/mediacentre/factsheets/fs150/en/>. Updated January 2014.

Protection: As head of the church, Christ uses his strength to protect his flock (Isaiah 40:10–11), and the church is to strive to be such a place of safety for children and abuse survivors alike.

Therefore, in light of the prevalence of sexual abuse in our world and in light of our Savior's example, we state clearly our convictions on these matters:

Compassion

- We believe our church is to be a place of compassion and love for victims of abuse, thereby imitating our compassionate Savior.

Justice

- We believe that any adult aware of sexual abuse or of allegations or suspicion of sexual abuse--whether occurring inside or outside the church--should report such allegations or suspicions to law enforcement or child protective services immediately, even when not directly required to by state law. We believe this course of action fulfills legal and moral responsibilities to protect children and promote justice that honors Christ.
- We believe our church is to proactively cooperate with all law-enforcement efforts to bring perpetrators to justice, thereby protecting children and promoting justice that honors Christ.

Healing

- We believe our church is to minister the love, grace, and healing of Christ to every person we encounter who has been a victim of sexual abuse, thereby imitating our Great Physician.
- We believe our pastors and church leaders are to give special attention to counseling victims of such abuse with sensitivity, skill, and compassion, thereby imitating our Great Physician.

Protection

- We believe our church must maintain robust child protection policies, especially in the implementation of effective safety systems designed to protect children or youth, thereby striving to protect children involved in church programs.