

# Suggestions Regarding Interpersonal Relationships in Christian Churches and Organizations

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Recent reports regarding both Protestant and Roman Catholic organizations and churches have been deeply disturbing. The incidence of sexual misconduct and abuse and harassment in these environments seems to have been unimaginably high. As with all other sins, the fundamental changes needed are in the hearts of men and women. But, also as with other behaviors, it is appropriate for Christian churches and organizations to consider adopting clear guidelines with respect to these kinds of matters.

Many churches and organizations will likely sense that such problems could/would never occur in **THEIR** environments . . . which is likely the same sense that many of the above-mentioned church and organizations felt at one time. We urge all Christian churches and organizations to take seriously the global prevalence of these problems and think now about ways to prevent and/or to handle them if they should arise.

What is offered below is an attempt to suggest some general considerations and some specific guidelines which Christian churches and organizations might consider adopting, in whole or in part.

Let there be no mistake, however; guidelines are useful only if they are clearly understood within the communities for which they are designed and only to the extent that they are fully implemented. And no guidelines can, by themselves, deal adequately with the hearts of those in those communities. Regular reminders of **all** the truths of Scripture must characterize every church and organization which calls itself by Christ's name. The suggestions below are simply one possible supplementary step which Christian churches and organizations might consider to make clear how the fundamental truths of Scripture should be lived out in the area of interpersonal relationships.

## General Considerations

[This material has been provided by Dr. Diane Langberg, Christian counsellor and author of ***Suffering and the Heart of God, Bringing Christ to Abused Women, The Spiritual Impact of Sexual Abuse, On the Threshold of Hope***, and many other books.]

The church is suffering greatly – by her own hands. Self-injury, whether by individuals or institutions, invariably involves faulty thinking that is born out of self-deception. Many of us are grieved at the wreckage in the church that occurs when victims are silenced, abusers are protected, power is abused and “truth” is disseminated to the less powerful. The body of our Lord is sick. Here are some thoughts for her.

To begin with, it is important to remember that all power is derivative. The power that is inherent in one's position, gifting, knowledge, verbal ability, or spiritual authority has one source – all power comes from Christ. He said, “All power is given to me in heaven and on earth...” It is not ours; it is his and is to

be used in accord with his word and his character. He who had all power never used it to feed on a vulnerable person, to increase his stature or to protect himself. Any power we have is his and is to be used to bless others with his grace and truth.

Second, God is ever and always, with no shadow or turning, both light and truth. He is truth. He is light. Light exposes the truth. It exposes beauty and horror. And truth always calls what is exposed by its right name. “White-washed tombs full of dead men’s bones” is both exposure and truth. To cover-up or even slightly shade, deceive or rename anything the light exposes is ungodly. The Light does not flinch. The Truth does not water down. You see it is only light and truth together that expose the cancer; call it by its right name and enable healing to occur.

Third, light and truth require transparency- which simply means letting light pass through so that what is hidden can be distinctly seen. Transparency is the opposite of complicity which means to be folded up with. That means that, for sin to be named, light is needed. We do not like it. Neither did Adam and Eve whose immediate response was to hide. We prefer hiding and damage control. God calls us to the truth and light of transparency. Transparency protects both alleged victims and alleged predators from the horrific burden of lies. A transparent process protects truth for all. When those in power attempt to dissemble in order to protect an institution they are no longer accomplishing damage control. They are causing damage – damage to God’s precious sheep and damage to the name of our God –this, in the name of protecting the house of the Lord. That is what the Israelites said in Jeremiah – “the Temple of the Lord” – all the while throwing their children, the vulnerable ones, into the fire of Moloch. God’s response was to destroy the temple system he ordained and designed and cast his people across the earth.

Fourth, words matter significantly. To call alleged victims liars is an attempt to determine outcome without knowledge. We are to call things by their right name. And as people of the Book we acknowledge that the human heart is utterly deceitful and our own is incomprehensible to us. That means we do not trust our own motives and hearts. It means we do not automatically assume our leaders, no matter how beloved, are telling the truth. And we certainly do not assume the vulnerable ones are liars.

Fifth, oh we say, but what about God’s grace and mercy? It is indeed vast and I am utterly grateful that I can stand in that myself. However, grace and mercy never, under any circumstances, tolerate sin – for it is the terminal illness that is slaughtering humanity – people God knit together, loves and died for. He will not budge an inch when that disease has a toehold in any human being. Cancer multiplies and spreads and kills. One cell is too much. Tearful apologies are not sufficient – only radical surgery. We fail to love those who abuse when we do not grasp this truth. Sin, like cancer, starts small and spreads and treatment knocks a life over. God’s love and mercy, like that treatment, will do the same.

Sixth, God’s people are called to humility. That means church leaders must recognize the potential for bias that is inherent in their positions. A fundamental understanding of our own capacity for self-deception requires that we avail ourselves the independent scrutiny of those that are not part of the institution. That also means we see that all power is derivative and that any power used to feed the self

in some fashion is not godly – no matter the attendance numbers, the money coming in, the books published, the gifting, the brilliance or any other thing. Humility bends down, becomes like, leaves glory, washes feet and ever and only listens to the voice of the Father no matter the cost.

Finally, dear vulnerable ones, those used, silenced, and cast aside – know that Jesus is often not like his church. He loves and calls us to truth and light, transparency and right naming. He himself is the one who bends to tend and care for you when his church does not. He weeps – not only over you and your suffering at the hands of those who name his name – but also over his church saying, as he did over Jerusalem: “If you had known the things that make for your peace...my house has become a den of robbers.”

### **Suggested Specific Guidelines for Christian Churches and Organizations**

[This material has been provided by Dr. Sam Logan, Associate International Director of the World Reformed Fellowship]

The Bible teaches that all Christians should be temperate, worthy of respect, self-controlled, pure, sound in faith, in love and in endurance. All of these – and many others - have one clear goal: we are so to live that we “will make the teaching about God our Savior attractive” (Titus 2: 1 - 10).

These broad and general expectations apply to Christian churches and organizations as well as to Christian individuals. The very fact that Scripture records these expectations indicates that we human beings do not naturally act in the ways prescribed. Christians call this “innate depravity,” a condition which affects us all. But 21<sup>st</sup> century culture has moved in directions which present even greater challenges in meeting these expectations. Some of those directions involve changes in societal understandings of gender roles while others involve changes in what is regarded as acceptable sexual behavior.

Clearly, fundamental issues with respect to integrity and power and transparency and accountability must be addressed. Failure to do so may weaken and perhaps eviscerate even the best concrete guidelines. But similarly, failure to suggest possible specific applications of broad biblical principles may render those principles vague, abstract, and open to widely diverse interpretations. “Safe Church” policies with respect to appropriate protections for children in religious environments both address fundamental issues of the heart and provide specific guidelines for churches and organizations. Similarly, based on the principles stated above, the following guidelines are suggested as one way in which Christian churches and organizations might specify how they will embody the biblical teachings . . . to the end that “we make the teaching about God our Savior attractive.”

#### **General Expectations**

Our church/organization is committed to creating a worship and work community in which members, friends, staff, volunteers, and visitors can worship and work together in an

atmosphere free of all forms of discrimination, harassment, exploitation, or intimidation. Specifically, all persons associated with this church/organization affirm that sexual contact of any kind is a blessing of and exclusive to a life-long monogamous heterosexual marriage and that any other sexual contact, any sexual or physical or emotional exploitation or harassment, and any use of pornography are prohibited by the commitments of this church/organization. It is the intention and responsibility of the church/organization to make clear the biblical basis for these commitments, to encourage and support those who share these commitments, and to take whatever action may be needed to prevent and correct behavior that is contrary to these commitments.

The key components of the specific details below seek to give expression to two of the key elements of Christian behavior mentioned above – transparency and accountability. These details conform to the legal requirements set forth in the statutes of [the State of \_\_\_\_ {Pennsylvania: <https://www.blr.com/HR-Employment/Discrimination/Sexual-Harassment-in-Pennsylvania>}].

The guidelines below apply to relationships between adults. Most of the guidelines relating to appropriate conduct between adults and children are provided in separate material which also conforms to legal requirements.

## 1. Leadership Conduct

All persons engaged in the leadership of this church/organization (including employees, elected or appointed officers, and recognized volunteers) are responsible for considering the possible impact of their words and actions when they minister to the emotional, mental, physical and spiritual needs of persons who come to them for help or over whom they have any kind of authority. Such consideration includes building a bond of trust that assures both parties of spiritual and physical safety. Never may anything be said or done which might reasonably be understood or interpreted as contradicting the above-stated principle regarding when and where sexual contact is appropriate.

This has special application in the following areas and ways which will normally be addressed in the statement of expectations and evaluation procedures of all ministry leaders:

- A. Initial employment and advancement will be determined solely on the basis of spiritual gifts and performance and will be reviewed by a mixed gender group of church or organizational leaders.
- B. Counseling advice will be provided solely on the basis of perceived biblical principles. Counseling will never be undertaken by any church or organizational leader unless there is at least one other person nearby with easy access to the location where the counseling is occurring. This guideline applies to the counselling of individuals and to the counselling of couples.

C. Whenever possible, extended counseling of an individual which involves sexual or marital issues will be conducted by an individual of the same gender as the gender of the person being counselled. When this is not possible, the counsellor will make it clear to the counselee that notes on each counselling session will be shared in confidence with one designated person at the church/organization, other than an officer of the church/organization, who is of the same gender as the person being counselled.

## 2. Ministry Opportunities and Challenges

In many Christian churches and organizations in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, women and men both play major roles, whether that extends to full organizational equality or not. The specific parameters of and biblical basis for the roles allowed to each of the genders must be made clear in the official documents of the church or organization. This includes, for example, any possible restrictions on men caring for infants and children or any possible restrictions on women serving in governance roles. Where there are no such officially recognized restrictions, there must be no unofficial hesitancy to utilize the gifts of men and women equally.

In light of what has been said in the previous paragraph, in many Christian organizations and churches in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, men and women often serve in ministry together, sometimes placing individuals who are not married to each other in close professional ministry proximity. This is both a potential blessing (because of the varied gifts brought to ministry by different individuals) and a potential temptation (because there really is, in all of us, some “innate depravity”). Neither the potential blessing nor the potential temptation can be ignored by the church or organization which genuinely seeks to “image Christ.”

A. When ministry-related meetings are planned between two individuals (whether of the same or different genders), information about the locations and the times of the meetings will be shared in advance either with the spouses of the individuals or, if either of the parties is unmarried, with a designated person in the church or organization who is of the same gender as the unmarried individual.

B. When ministry-related travel is undertaken by two individuals (whether of the same or different genders), information about the travel and its purpose will be shared in advance either with the spouses of the individuals or, if either of the parties is unmarried, with a designated person in the church or organization who is of the same gender as the unmarried individual.

C. When church or organizational responsibilities require travel which involves overnight accommodations, individuals of different genders should never share the same room unless those individuals are married to each other.

## 3. Handling Allegations of Misconduct

## A. General considerations

i. Christian churches and organization shall have and make public a procedure for reporting any violations of the above guidelines and shall have available at all times printed copies outlining this procedure. Some violations may also have legal consequences and those must be highlighted in the procedure mentioned above. Whenever there are possible legal implications, the church/organization shall make certain that the legal requirements are met. At the same time, the church/organization must make certain that no false witness is borne against either a possible victim or a possible guilty party.

ii. The church or organization shall, as a matter of course, have available the names of at least two different Christian individuals or agencies unaffiliated with the church or organization, which individuals or agencies are trained to deal with accusations of sexual abuse or misconduct. These are the “outside sources” to which allegations will be referred in the event of allegations of sexual misconduct.

iii. An accused person is presumed innocent until proven guilty. In the context of this policy, no adverse finding shall be made public or revealed against an accused person except on a need-to-know basis until a full investigation is completed and it has been determined that the complaint has been properly substantiated.

iv. This church or organization shall appoint two of its members as human resource contact persons. One shall be male and the other shall be female. Neither may be one of the official leaders of the church/organization or a spouse or other blood relative of one of the official leaders of the church/organization. These two members are bound by the same rules as bind other members of the congregation/organization. See especially items 2.A. and 2.B. above.

## B. Adjudicating accusations

i. Anyone suspecting or having knowledge of a violation of the above principles may report such violation to one or both of the human resource contact persons. If the report comes to one of the individuals, he or she shall immediately inform the other human resource contact person. The two human resource contact persons shall then immediately ask for a closed and confidential meeting with the officers of the church or organization. At that meeting, the details of the accusation will be provided.

ii. If the accusation is being made against one of the human resource contact persons, the other human resource contact person will request the meeting mentioned immediately above.

iii. If the accusation is of sexual misconduct, the officers of this church or organization shall contact one of the outside sources which has been identified and shall ask those individuals/agencies to investigate and to recommend possible follow-up actions relating to any accusation of a violation of this policy.

iv. If the accusation alleges sexual abuse or harassment of a minor, in addition to the requirements listed, the senior presiding officer of the church or organization will immediately take steps to remove the alleged offender (without implication of guilt or innocence) from contact with minors until an investigation is completed or until a resolution of the allegations has occurred and notify the parents or guardian of the minor;

v. When handling accusations of sexual misconduct, the outside source to whom the matter has been referred shall do the following:

a. Regularly make it clear to all involved that these matters must be and will be handled in confidence with great care for the reputations of any accuser, of any accused, of this church or organization, and of Christ Himself.

b. If the accusation involves any possible violation of civil law as defined by the document cited under "General Expectations" above, the outside individual or agency will immediately notify the appropriate authorities and will share the response of those authorities with the officers of the church or organization.

c. Seek a detailed written statement describing the alleged sexual misconduct from the party or parties making the accusation, which statement shall be shared with the party being accused but with no one else

d. Seek a detailed written response to the above-mentioned statement by the person who has been accused of sexual misconduct

e. Conduct interviews with the accuser and any possible supporters and with the accused and any possible supporters

f. Make a determination regarding the matter and prepare a proposed course of action for the officers of the church or organization to follow

g. The officers shall then take the necessary action and shall share with the accuser and the accused information about that action and the grounds for the action.

vi. If the accusation does not involve sexual misconduct, the governing body of the church or organization shall do the following:

a. Regularly make it clear to all involved that these matters must be and will be handled in confidence with great care for the reputations of any accuser, of any accused, of this church or organization, and of Christ Himself.

b. If the accusation involves any possible violation of civil law as defined by the document cited under "General Expectations" above, immediately notify the appropriate authorities.

c. Seek a detailed written statement from the party making the accusation describing the grounds for the accusation being made, which statement shall be shared with the party being accused but with no one else

d. Seek a detailed written response to the above-mentioned statement by the person who has been accused but with no one else

e. Conduct interviews with the accuser and any possible supporters and with the accused and any possible supporters of the accused

f. Take the necessary action and share with the accuser and the accused information about that action and the grounds for the action.

C. A written summary of all proceedings of the officers will be maintained. These written records will be kept confidential unless and until both the accused and the accuser (and, if an outside source has been involved, that outside source) request in writing that they be released or until the officers of the church or organization determine that releasing the materials will enhance the cause of justice. No partial release will ever be considered.

D. With respect to accusations of sexual misconduct, no person bringing an accusation shall be adversely affected in terms and conditions of employment, church membership, or affiliation, or otherwise discriminated against or discharged unless the outside resource determines that that person has acted unjustly, recommends to the officers of the church or organization that the person be disciplined, and the officers of the church or organizations determine to take such an action. With respect to accusations of anything other than sexual misconduct, no person bringing an accusation shall be

adversely affected in terms and conditions of employment, church membership, or affiliation, or otherwise discriminated against or discharged unless the officers of the church or organization determine by a two-thirds vote that the person has acted unjustly.

The material above was shared with numerous Christian individuals. Suggestions for improvement were sought, provided, and incorporated. Two individuals provided special assistance in this regard and their contributions are hereby acknowledged. They are:

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