



Abuse Awareness and Prevention Network

Summary Report: Consultation Feb. 3, 2022

Executive Summary

This report summarizes the findings of a consultation on abuse awareness and prevention with denominational, church, ministry, school and camp leaders.

It is evident that while ministries, denominations, schools and camps have policies in place to fulfill government and insurance requirements, significant work is still needed to provide more in-depth, nuanced awareness and prevention of different aspects of abuse and to provide better follow up in the event abuse occurs.

The primary finding from this consultation was the need for a resource hub that these organizations can turn to for trustworthy information and training. While awareness and prevention has been improving, policies aren't always up-to-date or widely accessible. Resources do exist, but the average congregation member likely does not know what to do if they, or someone they know, experiences abuse. More resourcing is needed in many areas, including abuses of power, best practices for church structures to prevent and recover from abuse, and research regarding populations vulnerable to abuse.

Participants agreed that a conference (or a webinar series) would be beneficial but emphasized the need for an ongoing network or resource hub so those who attend conferences or training events can have continued access to tools when they return to their local contexts.

Part 1: Big Picture Strengths and Needs

Most leaders in denominational, church, school, and camp settings reported prevention and awareness being among their strengths. Some leaders expressed thankfulness that there has been a shift beyond the early responses of thinking Christians and don't need to be concerned because "our people would never do this."

Participants still expressed the need to grow significantly in prevention. Awareness and prevention policies tend to focus on sexual and physical abuse but have gaps when it comes to other forms of abuse, such as emotional and spiritual abuse, abuses of power, harassment, and

violence (including domestic violence). There were also some concerns about the extent of awareness, such as recognizing signs of abuse.

To a lesser degree, participants reported having good policies, education/resources, and good reporting and response processes. But these policies may only be known by a few, such as senior pastors and children's ministry leaders; the average congregant may not be aware of the details. Further, annual policy reviews and signing documents can be a disengaged, ticking-off-the-box action on the part of staff members.

It was noted that some churches were initially motivated by insurance requirements when implementing abuse prevention policies. There needs to be a shift to look more into the "why" of these policies. As it is, churches and other ministries are acting in response to government requirements rather than leading in this area.

When asked about areas where they needed help the most, participants expressed the need for networking and sharing resources to avoid reinventing the wheel. There is a lack of resources available, including not enough French resources. One denominational leader said their denomination has resources, but that it is up to the individual churches to develop their own policies, creating training gaps.

There is also the need for reviewing, updating, and following abuse policies. In reality, many of these policies are created and then put on the shelf to gather dust, becoming irrelevant/incomplete. Another need is the cost involved; one particular area raised was the cost of investigations should a situation arise.

Another need is to address the full breadth of which populations are vulnerable to abuse. A participant noted the need to adjust the constant focus on children and women to encompass more marginalized communities. It is important to normalize talking about abuse prevention consistently, instead of just bringing it up when there are issues. As it is, everyday people do not know where to go or what to do if they see/experience abuse. An element of normalizing this process is being more prepared so that the occurrence of abuse does not dictate the response.

Part 2: Desired Outcomes from Consultation

Participants wanted access to a list of shared resources. Resourcing needs include exploring what defines abuse and misuse of power, empowering people to have a voice, and providing the support needed for alleged perpetrators. One example of sharing resources could be compiling a list of Christian investigators for abuse cases. Another outcome proposed was a research group to further study the issues and have an evidence-based response.

A theological template is needed to frame this resourcing in a holistic way—not as a response to insurance regulations. There should be more availability of training series for pastors and other leaders. Pastors also need to be encouraged to speak on abuse to help break the cycle. Plan to Protect wants more information on the gaps in their work that they aren't aware of.

More support is also needed in developing best practices on the cultures, narratives, and structures within churches, ministries, etc. There is a need to examine power dynamics to avoid creating harm and to know how to avoid re-victimization. More knowledge and awareness are also needed for working with vulnerable populations such as LGBTQ people. Participants expressed the desire to see resources for camp contexts on topics such as minors leading minors, dating complexities with different ages and staff-to-staff abuse awareness, as well as staff-to-camper.

Part 3: A Conference and/or Resource Hub

Participants were supportive of having an online or in-person conference. (There is a cost either way—in-person costs more money, online means limited networking.) Several leaders suggested small regional conferences and an online conference or webinar series over several weeks with a different topic each week. If recorded, these webinars could become a resource that people could listen to later. In terms of format for a conference, it was suggested that there be different streams or affinity groups. Workshops could be created based on context-specific needs (e.g. camps or universities). Another suggestion was to have a panel made up of multiple voices, e.g. theologians, pastors, and victims.

Participants suggested the conference content include best practices for providing restorative support for the emotional and physical health of victims. Another session idea was on how to help people follow their own policies when circumstances make it difficult. (E.g., backup strategy to mitigate risk, or how to process allegations when a leader is accused.) Another session could be on having adequate assessment tools for early indicators of abuse. Other topics suggestions included core competencies and code of conduct for leaders and basic mental health training. Finally, it was suggested to have content on trauma-informed supports, debriefing, and restorative work for victims and congregations after abuse has occurred.

Participants emphasized that a conference was a start, but there needs to be a larger, centralized network and resource hub. This equips those who attend conferences to return to their local contexts to educate and empower. This network needs to be trustworthy, with well-curated resources. It could be formed from a national group of denominations and organizations that collaborates and has a consistent presence in this space. Some aspects this network/resource hub could focus on are:

- Theological processes
- Transparency in responses to abuse
- LGBTQ+ policies
- Creating safe spaces for victims to bring their stories
- Up-to-date training videos
- A group of resources
- A research-based project
- A series of webinars (national & regional)