



**CHRISTIAN REFORMED
CHURCHES OF AUSTRALIA**

FOR JUSTICE AND HEALING

**Pastoral report and guidelines for dealing with “Abuse”
in the Christian Reformed Churches of Australia.**



Foreword to 2021 revision.

This document was originally adopted by the 1997 Synod of the Christian Reformed Churches of Australia. It was published by the Reformed Churches Publishing House under the authority of that Synod. It was provided as booklet for the leaders and members of the CRCA because of its educational value. It is for that same reason this material is being made available again. While much has happened in the area of abuse since that time, in terms of policies and procedures, the material in this document about the effects of abuse and pastoral care are still valuable. It is envisaged that this document will be used to provide training for church leaders, candidates for ministry and others. When it is clearly understood what abuse is, and its devastating effects, there will be a greater appreciation for the requirements that have come about as a result of the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse. This document has had some revision to update certain features and to reflect changes in state legislation. An appendix on 'A biblical view regarding child sexual abuse', that was part of the 2015 Synod report, has been added as well.

Introduction

1.1 Mandate

The 1994 Synod in Perth decided: “Regarding abuse, to appoint a study committee, which includes women to examine and evaluate the manner in which abuse situations (physical, emotional, spiritual and sexual) are being addressed and dealt with in the RCA; this Committee is to report to the next Synod and recommend effective responses to abuse situations; this Report should develop pastoral guidelines with particular attention being paid to preventing abuse as well as identifying, supporting and counselling the victims of abuse, their families, and the abusers.” (*Acts of Synod 1994, Art 62.11*)

1.2 Background

The above mandate came to Synod as a recommendation from the Youth Report. Under the heading of “Sexual abuse,” the Report noted that “...this problem is not a youth work development (it crosses all age groups and is by no means a recent phenomenon), nor does it come under this Committee’s jurisdiction. However, the matter has been raised in a number of youth work contexts.

For example, the Report notes that “At the Perth Youth Convention, sexual abuse instances became apparent when counselling was sought.” Also the Report notes that “The 1994 Youth Survey (conducted at the youth convention) leaves us with no doubt that this problem exists within our church, too”. The survey results indicated that 5% of the respondents said they had “...experienced sexual abuse in their childhood or adolescent years.” The survey received 222 responses who “...would probably represent the ‘more interested’ and ‘more committed’ end of the young people spectrum.

The mandate adopted by Synod is exactly the same as that adopted by the Christian Reformed Church of North America (CRC), except that at our Synod the fourth category of “spiritual abuse” was added.

1.3 The Committee

The Committee, as appointed by Synod, consisted of Rev Leo Douma (convener), Dr Jo Lammersma (psychiatrist, chairman of the SA Branch of Royal Australian and New Zealand College of Psychiatrists), with assistance received from Mrs Nel Kuilenburg (social worker, experienced in domestic violence) as corresponding member, together with the others listed.

The Committee was confronted with the enormity of its task, especially with the lack of resources and time in the South Australian setting. Most of the denominations in Australia have dealt with the mandated issues over the past number of years, some setting aside a team of full-time staff in the social, legal and ecclesiastical fields.

Our Committee, rather than “re-inventing the wheel” was able to receive material from many denominations, which demonstrated that each acknowledged abuse was a concern in their denomination. It was also noted that the pastoral guidelines and protocols were similar in each case, with variances depending on the church order of the denomination. The Committee found the material from the CRC most useful for our own Reformed context.

2 Church Survey of Abuse Prevalence

2.1 Focus of Mandate

The mandate assigned to the Committee does not ask for a biblical study to determine the denomination’s attitude towards abuse. Few people need convincing that abuse is sin, an evil. Nor do we need convincing that abuse occurs in our communities. The media and the research statistics make that all too clear. But there is an attitude that doubts the prevalence of abuse within the church. So the Committee determined that as our mandate requires us to “...examine and evaluate the manner in which abuse situations are being dealt with in the RCA,” that such would involve an attempt to establish the prevalence of abuse in our denomination and also to note how the congregations and sessions deal with this abuse.

The Committee decided that it was in no position to do a denominational survey amongst our membership. Instead, it decided to accept that the results of a major study by the CRC could be assumed as a baseline for

our own situation, since the CRC, especially the Canadian section of the church, has many similarities to our own denomination in terms of theology as well as ethnic and migrant backgrounds.

Furthermore, the results of the CRC study give a similar result to that obtained by church and community agencies in Australia. The Committee decided that the CRC results would be compared with an anecdotal study in which information would be sought from our denomination's ministers and sessions.

2.2 Abuse Survey in the CRC

The Abuse Study Committee of the CRC, in response to the same mandate as given above, decided to determine the prevalence of abuse within its denomination. To do that, they received the assistance of Calvin College, via its Social Research Centre. The Centre distributed a survey questionnaire (21-page booklet) to a random sample of 1000 members, of which 643 were returned. The survey found that of the respondents, 12% reported having experienced physical abuse, 13% as being sexually abused and 19% as having been emotionally abused. The total abuse prevalence rate (which indicates the percentage of a population who have experienced *at least one* of the forms of abuse) was found to be 28%. In other words, one in every four adults in the CRC.

Translating that across a denomination with approximately 196,000 communicant members, the Centre estimated that between 48,000 and 62,000 adult members of the CRC had experienced one form of abuse or another.

It needs to be further borne in mind that these results only gave indications concerning adults, as only those over 18 were surveyed. It did not include any of the children who may have been abused before or during the period of the survey.

The Research Centre felt that the results were not high in comparison with other American research. A 300-page report on the survey is available from the CRC for those who wish to assess the research methodology and statistical analysis for themselves.

The report outlines statistics about who are more likely to be abused, those who abuse and attitudes towards abuse and violence, e.g., the majority of abused persons are female: 86% of the sexually abused, 78% of the emotionally abused, and 77% of the physically abused. By and large abusers are reported to be male: 96% of sexual abusers, 70% of physical abusers, and 55% of emotional abusers. In cases of physical and emotional abuse, abusers were mostly reported to be family members, immediate or extended. For most abused persons, abuse (physical, sexual or emotional) began before their teens and ended by their 20s.

As was noted in the section above, the CRC results are not extreme, but compare with surveys done in Australia. A survey conducted in Brisbane surveying 1704 regular church attending women over 18 years of age, who were attending 32 Anglican and 33 Uniting church services found that of those women 21.9% reported that they had been abused by someone close to them at some time in their lives. A similar study of 2,050 individuals attending mass in Catholic churches in Brisbane found that 25.3% of males reported being sexually abused as a child, and 36.5% of women reported childhood sexual abuse.

A survey of social science students in post secondary state educational institutions found that 28% of female subjects and 9% of male students reported child sexual abuse.

2.3 Survey in the RCA

To have some form of anecdotal evidence to compare with the CRC research, the Committee wrote to all the ministers and sessions in our denomination, outlining working definitions for physical, sexual, emotional and spiritual abuse. They were asked to note the definitions and to consider how prevalent the four types of abuse were in their own congregation, as far as they were aware, and to outline how the session dealt with the abuse situations. The ministers were asked to give their own response first, because research showed that church members go to the minister with confidential matters.

The Committee sent out letters to each minister/church. It received a reply by mail or phone from 8 ministers and sessions, so a phone survey was conducted with a further 18 ministers who were available for comment. It is noted that there has been much movement by ministers recently so that many spoke more about their previous church than the one they currently serve. It takes time for congregational members to trust their minister and open up about confidential matters.

2.3.1 Physical Abuse

The following definition from the CRC was given:

***“Any intentional human act that results in physical pain or injury to another person – whether or not it is a cut or wound or leaves a mark or bruise. Physically abusive behaviour ranges from slapping, pushing, shoving, punching, kicking and biting to more severe forms like choking, severe spanking, beating, hitting with an object, burning, stabbing and shooting. In other words, any means of inflicting pain or injury to another person.*”**

Examples include:

- excessive tickling;
- ear or hair pulling that causes physical pain;
- slapping, kicking, or punching the head, face or body;
- choking with the risk of loss of consciousness;
- pushing or throwing across a room, down stairs, or against objects;
- severe shaking; breaking or twisting limbs;
- burning with irons, stoves, cigarettes or scalding liquids;
- injuring with thrown objects,
- stabbing or mutilating with a variety of objects;
- gunshot wounds;
- confinement, and forcing one to do something physically dangerous to oneself, such as taking drugs.

Physical neglect – ***not doing what one is supposed to be doing to meet the physical needs of someone in his or her care. Neglect interferes with or prevents the normal development of a child or adult.***”

Those ministers who listed the physical abuse they were aware of, bearing in mind the above criticism of the definition, listed severe cases. Just over **30+ cases** were identified. They were all within the family setting, mainly between husband and wife or father and children, ie, husbands striking their wife, with two extreme examples of a husband who placed a gun at his wife’s head, and another who choked his wife till she lost consciousness.

With regard to the children this related to fathers giving harsh and inappropriate punishment to their sons, including punching and breaking an eardrum.

One minister noted that much of this sort of abuse, particularly the violence towards the wives, remains unrevealed for fear of reprisal against the wives. The minister’s and session’s approach was to be direct and, where needed, intervening, e.g., providing shelter for an abused wife. Wrong parenting was challenged and at times diaconal support given for parent effectiveness training.

Some ministers wondered if their pastoral discipline was strong enough, as some men ignored the admonitions. Those ministers felt perhaps they should have referred the matter to social welfare. In one case threat of charges finally made one father re-think.

It was noted that some folk, now middle aged, accused their parents of neglecting them when they were young. Mention was made of the need to contextualise some matters, ie, in the sense of the early migrant days when migrants had large families, little money, were overworked and under great stress. Sometimes it got too much and people went too far, and members and elders quietly reminded each other of the boundaries.

2.3.2 Sexual Abuse

The following definition from the CRC was given:

***“Generally any sexual intimacy forced on one person by another. Sexual abuse may or may not involve contact between people.*”**

Examples of non-contact sexual abuse:

- people exposing themselves,
- obscene telephone calls,
- ‘peeping toms,’
- and requests to engage in sexual activity (where no physical contact occurs).

Examples of sexual abuse involving physical contact:

- fondling of body parts, such as breasts, crotch, buttocks, or sexual organs;
- body grabbing;
- intercourse;
- oral and anal sex.

Examples of adult sexual abuse:

- an unwilling partner;
- forced sexual practices that are uncomfortable or degrading to the partner;
- sexual relations that are forced upon and gained from a partner by threatening physical injury to that person;
- marital rape or forced intercourse within a marriage.

Examples of child sexual abuse:

- sexually taking advantage of a child who is not capable of understanding sexual acts or resisting coercion (threats, offers of gifts, and more),
- rape,
- child molestation,
- incest. Also ‘talking dirty,’
- exposing a child to pornography or pornographically exploiting a child.”

(As an added note to this revised report it should be noted that sexual abuse does not have to involve ‘force’ in the conventional sense. The form of force may be due to emotional manipulation, a position of power, or an age differential etc. because victims are not always aware as to how they have been coerced into sexual activity, they may blame themselves thinking they were equal participants in the sexual behaviour, or that they “asked for it”.)

The ministers, again speaking of what they were aware of, mentioned some **100 persons** – predominately women, but not all – who were sexually abused in their lives. They ranged in age from elderly women who were abused as children (so the occurrence of abuse is not new, it’s been happening for generations, but now the silence is being lifted), to younger women who are finding it difficult to cope in their relationships because of their abuse in earlier years. The vast majority of cases mentioned were abuse perpetrated within families, i.e. girls abused by their fathers (most cases mentioned), brothers, brothers-in-law, uncles, grandfathers.

Mention was made of abusers who were elders or youth leaders. Acts range from showing of pornographic material to incest. There were only a couple of references to sexual abuse by neighbours, babysitters or teachers (which confirms the CRC report that abuse is occurring in the family – ‘stranger danger’ is not the biggest danger). Several cases mentioned noted that those who abused were themselves abused. Reference was also made to indecent exposure and widows being propositioned.

In terms of pastoral response, some ministers noted that they and their session had not come across a lot of cases of sexual abuse, and did not have a defined policy of dealing with these matters, other than to say that they must be dealt with in a pastorally sensitive way. Other ministers had come across sexual abuse more frequently and had set up a procedure whereby the person revealing they had been sexually abused would be given good pastoral support by the minister, together with an elder or a gifted church member. They were then encouraged and supported to receive counsel from a qualified counsellor.

The perpetrator of the abuse would be instructed to undergo counselling and would also be pastorally supported. When necessary the abuser would be placed under silent censure.

It was noted that for several cases it was difficult to proceed with counselling or referring matters to community services because the parents did not believe that the abuse had occurred or had denied it. In most cases this pastoral work was done by the minister in confidence, with perhaps one elder or church member for support. The matters were generally not revealed to the full session. Often the sessions left it to the minister to work the cases through, but did not always give the minister support if he became overloaded with these matters.

There were those ministers who expressed their doubts about session's ability to deal with these matters or even keep confidences. Others expressed confidence to bring all the matters to their session because of the skilled members they had on the session. There are those churches which have attempted to address the problem of sexual abuse by having an open forum for discussion or inviting a Christian abuse counsellor to lecture on the subject. Also one or two churches are developing a protocol for their membership in dealing with these matters.

Concern was expressed that some sessions were not dealing with abuse matters very well; that there were cases of known abuse that were not dealt with, or the female victim was told to forgive and forget. This was seen as further abuse of those women and a sweeping under the carpet of that which constitutes a crime.

A couple of ministers expressed that they had not seen matters in that way, and realised that these are not simply matters to forgive and forget, but can be criminal matters that must be dealt with through the appropriate legal channels.

On the other hand others expressed concern that the matter of sexual abuse was being sensationalised, that the problem of false memory syndrome can cause a lot of pain and loss of reputation for some people. It was felt that emphasis should be put on forgiveness and moving on.

Further concern was expressed that with the emphasis on child abuse, parents would be hesitant to embrace their children, and so deprive them of the love they need.

2.3.3 Emotional Abuse

The CRC material defined emotional abuse as follows:

“Attempts to control another person’s life through words, threats and fear. It is the destroying of a person’s self-worth through harassment, threats and deprivation. Emotional abuse occurs when someone threatens the health or emotional well-being of another.

Examples:

- abuse of pets or destruction of physical objects with the implication that this could happen to the person being threatened;
- threats of physical violence against the person or others who are important to him or her, which undermine the person’s sense of safety, well-being, and control.

Other examples:

- name calling,
- excessive teasing,
- total silencing,
- insults and cursing,
- constant criticism,
- public embarrassment,
- general lack of consideration for the person’s feelings or needs,
- jealous control and false accusations,
- abusing or destroying pets,
- destroying or taking personal property,
- and withholding of sleep, friendship and other life necessities.

Emotional abuse weakens a person's mental and physical ability to resist, cuts off the person's contacts with others, and causes gradual loss of self-esteem – all of which reinforce a sense of helplessness and dependence on the abuser.”

The ministers, speaking from what they were aware of, mentioned more than **40+ situations** that they would regard as clear cases of emotional abuse. But in more general terms they suggest there could be dozens more. As one response suggested, it's hard to calculate the prevalence, it happens everywhere.

Again nearly all the cases raised were in the context of the family situation. The ministers spoke of husbands and wives using manipulative ways in their relationships, of a predominance of husbands dominating and intimidating their wives. Several mentioned families, wives and children, being emotionally abused by the husband, so that the family felt the need to leave.

Concern was also expressed about parents continuing to manipulate their grown up and married children. A few responses noted elderly widows who, on the one hand, missed their partners, but on the other, enjoyed a new-found freedom. Concern was expressed about a misconstrued male domination that was justified on the basis that wives should be submissive to their husband.

Some of the ministers noted that, in pastorally dealing with this kind of abuse, it was hard to discern and put a handle on it. Some had directly challenged the emotional abuser, but found that they did not always respond or see their manner as abusive. Some intervened where children were abused, but again this had not been well received. One minister taught a family the matter of setting appropriate boundaries for parent-child relationships. Again, ministers and sessions gave pastoral support as required.

2.3.4 Conclusions re the RCA Responses

The Committee, in reviewing the above material, concludes that the RCA, like the CRC and also many Australian denominations, must recognise that abuse occurs In our congregations, and that our churches must consider how we can improve on our pastoral care and support for those affected by abuse. The anecdotal evidence received does not allow us to do a statistical comparison with the CRC study, to note how our situation compares with theirs. But the fact that over 170 cases of abuse were identified by contacting 26 of our ministers makes the Committee wonder what the figures would be if all the ministers were spoken with or if a survey similar to that of the CRC were done of our membership.

It is interesting to note that a recent survey amongst Adventist young people showed that of those who indicated they had been abused, 63.5% had spoken to someone about it. Of those, only 5.3% indicated that they had sought to reveal their experience of abuse to a minister, whereas 47.3% spoke to a family member, and 35.1% told a close friend. So those cases that our ministers are aware of may, as several ministers have put it, simply be the tip of the iceberg. Or as others said, if you scratch you will find abuse, too many have skeletons in the closet.

Although the anecdotal evidence does not allow a statistical comparison with the CRC study, it is interesting to note that the RCA survey does bring out the same abuse patterns, ie, predominately females offended against, male perpetrators, mainly done in a family (nuclear and extended) context.

What is disconcerting is the RCA ratio of sexual abuse cases reported in relation to the physical or emotional abuse as compared to the CRC results. So the Committee's decision to use the CRC results as a baseline for our own considerations seems to be validated.

The Committee also notes from the above, that while some ministers and sessions have determined a working policy with regards to abuse, others have not; perhaps because they have not been made aware of, or had to deal with abuse in their congregation. What is troubling to the Committee is some of the approaches towards sexual abuse that seem to minimise it and call for easy repentance and forgiveness.

The Committee has no desire to sensationalise these matters, but it is concerned that the spiritual and emotional damage done by such abuse has not been understood. The development of understanding of the nature and effects of physical, sexual and spiritual abuse, together with pastoral guidelines will be outlined in the next section.

3. Pastoral Guidelines

3.1 Introduction

The Committee's mandate requires the Committee to "...recommend effective responses to abuse situations [and to] ...develop pastoral guidelines with particular attention being paid to preventing abuse as well as identifying, supporting and counselling victims of abuse, their families and the abusers."

Material fulfilling that requirement is presented below. The Committee decided that in view of its very limited resources, and the fact that its mandate is identical to that given to the CRC Committee, and further that the RCA survey demonstrates similar patterns of abuse as compared with the CRC, that it made sense to present the Synod with the guidelines developed by the CRC Committee on Abuse.

Our Committee is of the opinion that they are a well written and a well-balanced set of guidelines. They are better than the numerous papers seen from other Australian denominations in being more suited to our Reformed background and are more thorough. Thus, much of the following material is taken from the CRC Report 30 of the 1992 Synod, and adapted for our Australian situation. Our thanks are expressed to the CRC.

3.2 Biblical Theological Perspectives

Reformed theology has long been well aware that reading scripture demonstrates a balanced approach to the themes of creation, fall, redemption and hope. So we approach our analysis of family and social life in terms of these four categories, noting also the need to honour these four themes simultaneously.

3.2.1 Humankind – Created with Dignity for Sociability and for Responsible Dominion

The Bible notes in several places (Gen 1:26-27; Gen 5:1; Gen 9:6; James 3:9) that human beings are made "in the image of God." Although this phrase is never systematically exegeted in Scripture, the context of the creation account suggests that people image God in being irreducibly social and in being called to exercise dominion as his regents. In addition, an inherent dignity, bestowed by God himself, rests upon each of his human imagers. This dignity, with its implied right to safety and respect, is well-captured by the 'image' passages in Genesis 9:6 and James 3:9.

In Genesis 9:6 God proclaims as part of his covenant with Noah, "*Whoever sheds the blood of a human, by a human shall that person's blood be shed; for in his own image God made humankind*" (NRSV). The apostle James (3:9) laments the violence that can be done to others by the spoken word: "*With [the tongue] we bless the Lord and Father, and with it we curse those who are made in the likeness of God... My brothers and sisters, this ought not to be so*" (NRSV).

The sentiment that "sticks and stones may break my bones, but names can never hurt me" – a jingle with which many of us were raised – is anything but biblical. The Bible is adamant that words can be vehicles of violence toward others.

Sociability and accountable dominion, two other aspects of the image of God, also have implications for God's intended structure for human relationships. In Genesis 1:26 the words "*Let us make humankind in our image*" suggest an announcement to the heavenly hosts who were inhabiting God's court. Although the creative initiative and power remain God's alone (as vs 27 confirms), God is apparently not alone at the creation of the earth. Indeed, Paul in his letter to the Colossians (1:17) speaks of Jesus Christ as having been "*before all things*" and the one in whom "*all things hold together.*"

Genesis 1:2 speaks of the "*Spirit of God moving over the face of the waters*" at the beginning of creation. Thus, God not only is surrounded by his angelic hosts at creation but also is from the beginning a social trinity of Father, Son, and Spirit.

Given the social nature of God himself, we are not surprised to read God's conclusion in Genesis 2:18 that it is "*not good for the man to be alone.*" So, God created the woman.

When we look at both creation accounts together, we can see that God's clear intention for woman and man is inter-dependence and equal value in the context of differing sexuality. The cultural blessing of Genesis 1:28 is directed to both of them: "*Be fruitful and multiply; fill the earth and subdue it.*" Both are to live out

their social natures by reproducing the race; both are to exercise accountable dominion over the rest of creation.

The Genesis 2 creation account is not in opposition to this, despite differences in emphasis: the man “*cleaves to his wife, and they become one flesh*” (Gen 2:24). She is the “*helper corresponding to him*” (Gen 2:18), with the word ‘helper’ implying no inferiority. Indeed, in the Old Testament Hebrew the word ‘helper’ is used overwhelmingly of God himself, as in “*our help and deliverer*” (Ps 70:5) and “*our help (which) comes from the Lord*” (Ps 121:12).

Marriage, then, is part of God’s basic creation order, the first building block in the edifice of family and social relations. That God intended it to be a lifelong, one-flesh, monogamous union is both affirmed in the creation accounts and re-affirmed by Jesus (Mark 10; Mt 19; Luke 16). Certainly, one does not have to marry in order to image God’s sociability or to carry out the cultural blessing in cooperation with others. Indeed, in the New Testament church it is the kingdom-building company of the redeemed who become the new family of God, purely biological ties now taking second place.

However, marriage is not God’s second-best solution for those who cannot contain their sexual desire well enough to serve him as celibate singles, as some non-Reformed traditions have taught. Marriage is part and parcel of what God has approved for human life on earth, reflecting the unity in diversity of God himself, as well as being the vehicle through which future imagers of God are nurtured to maturity.

3.2.2 The Distortion of God’s Image

If we could stop with a creation theology of marriage and social relations, then we could perhaps excuse the tendency of some to idealise family life and to call for its virtual exemption from legal, social and ecclesiastical scrutiny. Reformed theology does not permit such a simplistic stance. Its doctrine of total depravity, so often misunderstood as the conviction that human beings can do nothing good, is the key to a balanced understanding of the character of family and social relations.

The doctrine of total depravity, properly understood, in no way denies the continuing possibility of positive, creational functions in God-ordained institutions such as marriage and family. What that doctrine *does* affirm is that no aspect of human functioning is *exempt* from the effects of sin – neither our wills, our rational capacities, nor our interpersonal and institutional relationships, including those of family and church.

It is for this reason that some Reformed theologians prefer the term ‘*pervasive depravity*’ to the term ‘*total depravity*’ (Anthony A Hoekema, *Created in God’s Image*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1986). According to this doctrine there is no human institution that can be romanticised as an automatic “haven in a heartless world.”

A more accurately Reformed metaphor might be paraphrased from a well-known nursery rhyme, “When human relationships are good, they are very, very good. When they are bad, they are horrid.”

Woman and man, created equal in God’s image, were called to sociability with each other and responsible dominion over creation. Both of these capacities were to be exercised within limits set by God alone.

The promise to man and woman of eternal, satisfying fellowship with their Creator rested on a condition: they were not to use their freedom and dominion to decide the nature of good and evil (Gen 2:17). The cultural blessing stopped here, for the power to determine good and evil rests with God alone. Nor were they to misuse their unity as one flesh to persuade each other to step beyond these bounds – yet that is what happened. Led astray by the evil one, the woman exceeded the bounds of assigned dominion by eating of the tree of knowledge of good and evil. The man, in turn, exceeded the limits of marital solidarity by accepting some of the fruit from the woman, even though he knew that their unity as husband and wife was not to supersede their obedience to God (Gen 3:1-8).

From the fall onward, and despite their continuing creational character, human relationships have been laced with sin. The Bible is unsparing in its documentation of the results. From Cain’s murder of his brother, Abel (Gen 4:1-16), to the Pharisees’ self-serving neglect of elderly parents via a pseudo-religious sheltering of their assets (Mark 7:9-13), we are regularly exposed to the distortions wrought by sin on what God intended to be relationships of mutual trust, service, and love.

Scripture presents us with blunt accounts of rape, adultery, incest, and polygamy run wild (recall Solomon’s seven hundred wives and three hundred concubines). The Bible tells of sins aimed at covering up previous

sexual sins – witness the account of Potiphar’s wife playing sexual victim after unsuccessfully trying to seduce Joseph (Gen 39). Witness also David’s plot to murder the husband of the woman he impregnated (2 Sam 11). Notice also that David’s violence and sexual sin find an inter-generational echo in his son Amnon’s rape of his sister Tamar (2 Sam 13).

The book of Judges twice contains the ominous statement *“In those days there was no king in Israel; all the people did what was right in their own eyes”* (Jud 17:6; 21-25). To illustrate the fruits of this lawlessness, the book includes an account of the rape of the Levite’s concubine and the brutal tribal feud which resulted (Jud 19-21). It also includes an account of the sacrifice of Jephthah’s daughter for the sake of her father’s rash vow (Jud 11:30-40).

None of these are meant to portray God’s intention for interpersonal relations. Rather, they accurately portray fallen men and women, ‘warts and all’ – a portrayal that Paul confirms when he summarises the sinful tendencies that beset Jew and Gentile alike: *“There is no one who is righteous, not even one... Their mouths are full of cursing and bitterness. Their feet are swift to shed blood; ruin and misery are in their paths, and the way of peace they have not known”* (Rom 3:10; 14-17).

3.2.3 The Call to a Redeemed Life

The apostle Paul knew that human deliverance from sin and its violent aftermath depends upon the sacrifice of Jesus Christ and the gift of his Spirit. The healing of division between Jew and Gentile, recorded in Ephesians 2, is an example of the unity now possible – at least in first-fruits form – between bond and free, male and female, parent and child: *“But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he is our peace... and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us”* (Eph 2:13-14; see also Gal 3:28; Mal 4:6).

Later in the same epistle, Paul challenges his readers to a life of mutual service. Even in the midst of a patriarchal culture, husbands are to love their wives *“as their own bodies”* and *“as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her”* (Eph 5:28, 25). In this same culture, which still took it for granted, Paul begins undermining slavery by calling for new attitudes and behaviour. Although slaves are to serve from the heart, knowing that they are first and foremost *“slaves of Christ,”* their masters are to *“do the same to them... for you know that you have the same Master in heaven, and with him there is no partiality”* (Eph 6:6-9).

While children are to honour their parents, fathers are expressly told not to *“provoke [their] children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord”* (Eph 6:4). Paul affirms to the young church what Jesus had established in his earthly ministry, namely, that he had come *“not to abolish the law but to fulfill it.”*

In his exegesis of this statement (Mt 5), Jesus rejects mere literal interpretation of the law and shows to what high standards of inter-personal conduct the law actually calls us. Not just literal murder makes us culpable, but verbal abuse as well; not just actual adultery, but lust also. The *lex talionis* (“an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth”), originally intended to ensure that punishments fit but did not exceed their crimes, had become a self-serving legalism. In contrast, Jesus calls for restraint and a returning of good for evil (Mt 5:38-42).

The Deuteronomic ‘bill of divorce’ provision, originally intended to clarify a divorced wife’s status so that she could remarry, had long since deteriorated into a means by which male Israelites could discard wives on a whim. Against this, Jesus invokes the creation norm of life-long monogamy (Mt 5:31-32; Mt 19:3-9). This teaching so surprised his disciples that they concluded it would be easier not to marry at all (Mt 19:10).

Even in their original context, the Old Testament laws to which Jesus refers existed less to protect the privileges of the strong than to guarantee justice for the weak. Other Ancient Near Eastern legal codes often had lofty preambles about caring for the poor but no actual directives to support the code. But the covenant code (Ex 20:22 - 23:23), and the book of Deuteronomy, contain specific legislation to ensure that the enslaved, the widowed, the orphaned, the poor, and the stranger are not exploited but, instead, are securely integrated into the economic and social life of Israel.

To this list of vulnerable groups Jesus pointedly adds children, whose very vulnerability reflects the attitude required of anyone wishing to enter the kingdom of heaven (Mt 18:1-5). No fewer than five times throughout the Gospels Jesus warns that these *“little ones”* (in the immediate context he means *children*, but the image also pertains to other easily exploited groups) are God’s special concern. Of those who cause them to stumble, Jesus says, *“It would be better for you if a great millstone were fastened around your neck*

and you were drowned in the sea” (Mt 18:6; cf Mt 18:10; Mt 18:14; Mark 9:42; Luke 17:2).

This warning (like the ones in Mt 5) is sounded not to replace grace with works in the process of salvation or sanctification. Rather, it shows how important children and other vulnerable groups are in God’s sight. If the last are to become first in God’s kingdom (something that Jesus affirmed no fewer than six times), then those charged with their care must tremble at the thought of abusing their authority, as must those who turn a blind eye to such abuse.

Jesus’ words do not deny the possibility or desirability of forgiveness, especially given the complicating truth that when the sins of the parents are visited upon the children when abuse begets abuse – the allocation of responsibility becomes very complicated. But neither can these qualifiers become an excuse for dispensing cheap grace to the abuser. The cost of true discipleship, as well as of personal healing, may have to include painful self-examination, confession, and either symbolic or actual restitution.

3.2.4 Living Between the Times

We have already affirmed the value of the much-misunderstood doctrine of total depravity in constructing a Reformed understanding of abuse situations. To conclude the biblical-theological portion of this Report, we want also to affirm the doctrine of grace. Subsequent sections of this Report will caution against the hasty dispensation of ‘cheap grace’ in cases of abuse.

Victims and perpetrators are rarely in a peer relationship (as is assumed, for example, in the church-disciplinary principles of Mt 18:15-20). Consequently, extended self-examination, confession, counselling and restitution on the part of the perpetrator always need to precede forgiveness. Moreover, victims must be allowed to set the timetable for their forgiveness of abusers. Hasty pressure on the part of others must be avoided.

Nevertheless, the goal of all church discipline is ultimately forgiveness, healing and the re-integration of both offender and offended into the supportive and loving fellowship of Christ’s body, the church. *“For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith,”* Paul writes to the Ephesian church, *“and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God – not by works, so that no one can boast. For we are God’s workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do”* (Eph 2:8-10).

However, the possibility of substantial healing through grace and forgiveness is not to be confused with the assumption that mere human beings can produce the new heaven and earth within history by their own efforts. We live between the times in the era of the ‘already and the still not yet.’ God is sovereign over history, and God will finally make all things new in the return of his Son. Consequently, there is no human equivalent of a ‘war to end all wars’ regarding the evil of interpersonal abuse.

We cannot become complacent and assume that we have so structured our religious, social, and civic life that abuse has been all but eliminated. Because sin originates in the human heart and because even the redeemed in Christ still struggle against the residual impulses of the old self, we must recognise that structural change can help eliminate abuse, but it cannot guarantee its total elimination.

That the prevalence of various kinds of abuse has been shown to be in the churches in Australia, as well as in the general population, it should remind us that even those who have immersed their lives in church, Christian schools, etc, are not free from the risk of abuse, either as perpetrators or victims. Indeed, their location in such pervasively church settings may mask the very existence of abuse and produce a resistance to naming and dealing with it by perpetrators, survivors and the community at large.

In this area of our lives we do well to recall John Calvin’s injunction to *pray and work*. Without becoming complacent (or, alternatively, despairing) about what we can accomplish in a fallen world, we are continually to be erecting ‘signposts,’ pointing toward the kingdom of shalom, in which all tears will finally be wiped away (Rev 21:1-4).

3.3 Psychological, Social and Spiritual Issues

With the CRC abuse survey, many abuse survivors shared their painful stories. The CRC report published, with the permission of the person concerned, the story that one woman wrote. Noted below, it helps portray some of the pain and dilemmas which such people go through, and also helps us see the need to address the issue of abuse.

How Incest Affects My Life

It (incest] permeates every facet like an ugly weed that won't ever go away completely no matter how you work with it. I learn new and challenging ways to deal with it as I grow. With a positive frame, I say it provides the opportunity to grow. On the other hand I sometimes feel as if my very soul has been affected – shattered in some way.

It is not as if I have suffered any sadism, etc, like those victims of ritual abuse. So I sometimes feel like I don't have the right to feel so strongly about the effects. But the reality is – those four years of overt sexual abuse by this man who is my natural father, who loves me, have changed my life forever.

You've done a lot of reading, so I'm sure you're aware of a lot of the effects. I just highlight for me, personally, areas that people tend not to think about.

- a. Christmas time – family time – although fun, and I do enjoy it, but there is the undercurrent always – what card do I buy? My mother says she wants to spend the night, Christmas Eve, if the weather is bad. How do I handle that? My children want to make elaborate gifts, like, “you're the best Grandpa, I love you so much!” And I cringe and I don't want to be a negative influence on their relationship, but it hurts.
- b. Do I tell my children? When? Will they hate me for it?
- c. It wasn't until approximately four or five years ago that I finally in my heart knew that God didn't “allow” or “cause” this to happen, because I needed it to grow up to be empathetic, kind, etc.
- d. I married when I lacked insight and judgment about myself.... [My husband and I] had such a difficult time developing our relationship. It is better now but continues to be a struggle at times.
- e. I believe my sexuality – my freedom, body perception, and image – have been permanently destroyed.
- f. It is extremely difficult to accept nurturing from others.
- g. Do healthy families exist? I can only wonder and covet healthy father-daughter relationships – something forever lost to me. It causes me less pain now, but it is difficult to see and believe in others.
- h. Because we have the privilege of an ongoing relationship as an extended family, there are some difficulties inherent in that. I continue to live with the secret because many, most people don't know. So when, for example, someone asks “Can't your parents take the kids over the spring break?” because baby-sitting is an issue, I say “No” with a fleeting moment of sadness, knowing they wonder, because my Dad is known for being great with kids.
- i. How the abuse affected my relationship with God is a very difficult question. I'm not always clear about that. There are the obvious ways that any adolescent is affected when they see what they believe is hypocrisy. However, there were times back then...that I truly believed that no human being was ever to be trusted and only God could be trusted – it was an extremely lonely feeling, in a weird way, comforting. Those were in the days when I could only see in extremes of black and white – no human could, therefore, pass the trust issue by the mere fact of being human. However, although I said only God could be trusted – I didn't even know the meaning of the word! I still don't! I get glimpses of it occasionally and I attempt to surrender myself in trust, but I can only really do that with God's help when I let myself. This is so extremely difficult and so peaceful when I've experienced it. Surrender in trust is a loaded issue for me because I was hurt so badly at the very core of my being – in my soul – when as an innocent child I naturally trusted as children do.

I still sometimes question – when I die will I find out that my belief was in vain and that it was all a cruel joke? Now, I know that's not true, but sometimes... As I'm writing, I find myself distancing. Dissociating still happens... I'm scared to send this. I feel like I can present to everyone a strong competent person. I am that person, but there is also the other side – where sometimes I wish I could be relieved of the battle of life as we know it and Christ would return today.

3.3.1 Physical Abuse

Not all violence is evidence of hate or of deliberately cruel intent. The connection between love and violence is potentially close and tragic. It is possible to see certain expressions of violence as 'love' or as 'protection' from harm or evil. Parents who firmly believe that 'spare the rod and spoil the child' is a major principle of parenting or who beat their children 'for their own good' are usually not guilty of hating their children.

One can look at emotional, physical and sexual abuse as perverted ways of acting out the human needs of loving and being loved. But the very closeness of this connection between love and violence is what makes abuse so damaging; this closeness causes its effects to carry on through adult life and even into the next generation.

When a relationship becomes abusive, whether between husband and wife or between parents and children, power is exercised not on the basis of the other person's best interest but rather on the basis of one's own self-interest. The other person becomes an object for propping up one's own sense of worth. Husbands beat wives when, as men, they feel challenged or threatened. Husbands may also abuse their wives as a test: "If I do even this, will she love me / stay with me?"

Such husbands, being emotionally/psychologically dependent on their wives, are literally unable to respect or even see their wives as separate individuals. If the wife of such a man makes a move toward self-respect or legitimate self-assertion, her action feels to her husband like psychological amputation and triggers his major weapons of defence, including physical attack. When parents feel inadequate, incompetent or undermined, they may beat their children.

Such parents do not have enough inner sense of adequacy or worth to see their children as distinct from themselves. For such parents, their children's behaviour becomes a reflection on the parents as persons. At the root of familial violence lies the fear or sense of impotence. Victims of family violence tell us that the violence tended to increase at times when the father and/or the mother felt threatened in significant areas of their lives: for example, after immigration, after a job loss, or after a move into an unfamiliar environment with resulting loss of extended family, social, or church ties.

Children who are physically abused grow up with a profound sense of being bad, worthless and unlovable. They lack a supportive context in which to discover themselves, e.g., to try new things or take on successive developmental tasks. They may withdraw and live in fear, or they may imitate the parents' behaviour outside the family and become neighbourhood bullies.

If these children have no corrective experiences with other people, they themselves will often marry persons who confirm that sense of worthlessness. And the cycle is set to repeat itself.

Presenting God's good news of unconditional love may produce intellectual assent and, perhaps, some emotional and spiritual relief. But the wholehearted experience of being unconditionally loved by others may escape the victim of abuse. At the heart of the pain of both abused and abuser lies this conviction: "I am irredeemably bad."

3.3.2 Sexual Abuse

Sexual abuse, particularly between parent and child, is perhaps the most damaging form of abuse. A child who is sexually abused has been deeply wounded in body, in heart, and in soul. Although healing is possible, the damage can never be totally undone. The abuser has robbed the child of innocence.

Sexually abused children learn to fear rather than to trust the people in whom they have a right to invest their trust. They learn to anaesthetise their bodies, that is, to turn off bodily sensations in order to avoid pain. With even more serious implications for healthy and appropriate sexual experience in later life, some turn off their bodies to pleasurable sensations that as children they knew intuitively were out of place.

The premature arousal of sexual feelings caused by abuse may lead others to wholly inappropriate sexual behaviour, with a separation of sexuality from other forms of intimacy and from commitment. They develop a sense of shame that invades every part of their being – body, heart, and soul.

This toxic shame effectively robs sexually abused children of the confidence to move forward in psycho-spiritual-social development, to trust others, to trust themselves, to make appropriate life decisions and appropriate moral choices.

If the abuser is one who commands respect in public or in the church, the child is left totally isolated both by the secrecy commanded by the abuser and by the shame-producing conviction that “I am bad, it must be my fault.”

It is not difficult to see the implications for the spiritual life and experience of victims of abuse. Trust has been so seriously betrayed and violated, they find it difficult to trust God, particularly when God is spoken about only as “Father.” These children have not experienced God as an “*ever present help in time of trouble*,” though many children have pleaded with God to make the abuse stop. They may interpret God’s apparent inactivity as reinforcing their conviction that they are irredeemably worthless.

Survivors of abuse speak in terms of believing in God but having very little – if any – experience of loving him. “Oh, I believe in God all right,” said one woman, “but I don’t know where he is in my life. He’s not close.”

True, the gospel of God’s sacrificial love is the antidote to the toxic shame of abuse. But children who have suffered sexual abuse from a parent or another person whom they ought to have been able to trust are robbed of the emotional capacity to trust or to appropriate God’s love or to respond to it in a wholehearted way.

True, everyone who trusts God must surrender in faith. But for the child who has been sexually abused, that leap of faith is enormous.

3.3.3 Emotional Abuse

Examples of emotional abuse are extensive and varied. A few examples follow:

- “My ex-husband verbally abused me. He would withhold sex. If I cried, he would love me.”
- “My eighth-grade teacher in the Christian school was a cruel man and often belittled me, telling me that I was lazy, undisciplined, etc. He would point this out in front of the entire class...”
- “[I was] told continuously that I would never be anyone. I was no good, couldn’t live up to the standards of society or the church.”
- “In high school I had a boyfriend who wrote to me in the summer. [My older brother] would get to the mail before me, open my letters, and give them to my parents to read. I never got to read them.”
- “If I did or said something my mother didn’t like, she would give me the ‘silent treatment’ until I apologised or did what she wanted.”

Emotional abuse is (always) a component of physical and sexual abuse, but it is possible to abuse someone emotionally without using physical violence or sexual coercion. Name-calling, constant criticism, preferential treatment or excessive blaming of one child over others, ridicule, manipulation by inducing unnecessary guilt, withdrawal of affection, silence, intrusion on legitimate privacy or activity – all of these are abusive ways to exercise power over others.

Personal power is inherent in all human relationships. The Bible describes this power as “servant power.” This means that a person must exercise his/her power in such a way that others are enabled to discover and develop theirs. A husband exercises his power most biblically when he enables his wife to develop as the unique person who is his wife. A wife exercises her power most biblically when she enables her husband to develop as the unique person who is her husband.

Verbal put-downs or attempts to control the other’s behaviour by emotional manipulation have no place in a marital, parent-child, or any other human relationship. Parents must use their power to create an environment where children can safely develop physically, mentally, emotionally and spiritually. Parents must meet children’s physical needs for food, warmth, shelter and touch. They must allow age-appropriate choices and set age-appropriate limits so that their children can begin trustingly to take on developmental tasks in an atmosphere of encouragement and acceptance.

Children should not be told “you’re stupid.” Behaviour may be labelled wrong, unacceptable or stupid, but criticism of behaviour must always be distinct from attack on the personhood of the child. Children who know from their earliest childhood that they are loved and cherished, not first of all for what they do, but for who they are, grow up with a profound sense of inner security.

Furthermore, the seed of the gospel of God’s great unconditional love for them will be planted in soil that is ready to receive it because their parents have prepared them emotionally.

3.3.4 Pathways to Healing

Healing for the abused and the abuser is a complex and lengthy process. A wife who is being abused must be encouraged and helped to find a shelter for battered women or another safe place where the batterer cannot contact her privately.

Reunion should be contingent on both husband and wife engaging in individual counselling, which should be followed by marital counselling. Joint marital counselling undertaken too soon may short-circuit the process of healing. In joint sessions, the wife may realistically be too afraid to be open; such openness may jeopardise her safety. Also, the husband may too quickly say that he is sorry, before any significant change in himself has taken place. The physical safety of the wife is of paramount importance.

If physical or sexual abuse of a child is taking place, the appropriate government authority must be notified. By law, those involved in working with children and young people must notify the State Based Welfare Service/Department wherever there are 'reasonable grounds' to suspect that a child has been abused.

The first requirement is to ensure the safety of the child and to ensure that the abuse will stop. This may require separating, at least temporarily, the abusing parent from the abused child. Our insistence on the primacy of the intact family unit must not cloud our judgment on this. The abuser needs to know he/she has committed a serious crime and needs to face its immediate consequences. The abused person needs to know that she/he has been heard, has been taken seriously, and will be protected. If the abused person is in immediate danger and requires protection call the police on 000.

Note: Although it is clear that some abusers are female and some abuse victims are male, we use she to refer to survivors and he to refer to perpetrators in the pages that follow.

1. *Opening the Secret*

The secret must be broken. The abused needs to tell someone everything. Depending on the victim's age at the time of abuse and on the severity of the abuse, it may take a long time before the victim can talk about it. Memories may be deeply repressed.

Feelings, too, are often deeply repressed. The pain, the shame, the confusion, and above all the rage must be re-experienced consciously. They must be re-experienced with someone who can stay with the abused person without condemning her for her feelings and without accusing her of betraying the family. She needs to be assured that what happened to her as a child was a criminal act for which the perpetrator is responsible, not she.

She may experience a profound crisis of faith, through which she needs to be accompanied with understanding and patience. She needs to regain a sense of her physical body as a wonderful instrument through which she is capable of giving and receiving deep, intense pleasure. She may need to be gently guided to the knowledge that, though she was not responsible for what happened to her in the past, she is now responsible for how she lives with that past.

The abuser also needs to tell someone everything. Denial in varying degrees is always present. Denial may take the form of simply saying it never happened. Or it may be disguised in generalities: " 'it' was 'our' sin" or " 'it' may have happened; I don't remember." Questions of what, who, when, where, and how often need to be asked insistently.

Someone must teach the abuser on a cognitive level the appropriate relationships between men and women, between parents and children, between older and younger persons. He needs emotional re-education in terms of how to handle stress, how to express anger, how to express sadness, how to express love. If he is a sexual abuser, he needs to learn how to handle strong feelings of all kinds without 'automatically' resorting to sexual release.

He also needs to re-experience the pain and anger of his own childhood if, as is often the case, he himself was a victim of abuse. He needs to indicate awareness of and to accept responsibility for the enormity of his crime and the enormity of its effect on the life of his victim. This may take place through some form of restitution to the victim or acceptance of some kind of consequence for himself.

2. Confrontation

After the survivor has begun to face her pain and rage, she needs to consider whether or not to confront her abuser. If the abuser is a family member with whom there is ongoing contact, this may be a necessary step in her healing. This step requires enormous courage and careful preparation on her part if it is to be effective.

The choice of whether to do it, when to do it, and who should be present at the encounter should be under her control. The encounter should not be forced by the church or by other helpers. She needs to have come far enough in the process of healing that she will still be able to carry on in her healing if her abuser continues to deny that he did it, or if family members shame or ostracise her for breaking the secret.

Regardless of the outcome of the encounter, she should be able to emerge from it with less guilt and with a clearer sense of where her responsibility lies and where it ends. She should not re-experience victimisation in the encounter.

If face-to-face encounter is potentially dangerous for the survivor or if the abuser is dead, the survivor is still responsible for speaking as directly as possible to her abuser. There are ways of accomplishing this in counselling.

3. Forgiveness

Only after these steps are completed (and they may take years) it is helpful to talk with the survivor about forgiving the abuser. Short-circuiting the above process will not do. The survivor may be too quick to 'forgive,' in which case she may avoid experiencing the depth of her pain, shame and rage, only to have it return at a later date.

Forgiveness, then, becomes an easy escape from immediate pain and is therefore not authentic. The abuser, early on in confrontation, may weep and say, "I'm so sorry, I wish it had never happened, and I know it will never happen again." Such a statement indicates that the abuser has little or no awareness of how deeply impoverished his own emotional life is. Nor does he see how little insight he has into himself and how vulnerable he is to repeat his offense. To forgive on the basis of such tears and statements allows the abuser to escape with neither forgiveness nor healing.

3.3.5 Children and Abuse

Statistics show that the majority of male abusers were childhood victims of abuse. Similarly, many female adult victims of abuse report that they were also childhood victims of abuse. Thus, young male victims of abuse are at risk of becoming abusers as adults, and young female victims of abuse are at risk of continuing to be victims as adults.

While the *healing* ministry often focuses on adult men and women, the process of *preventing* abuse must be targeted toward the very young, the most vulnerable, and those least able to protect themselves. Our church cannot and may not deny that adult survivors and abusers in our congregations were more than likely also child victims.

It is necessary, then, to examine the impact of physical, sexual, and emotional abuse on the lives of young children and adolescents.

1. Pre-School

A child from infancy to about five years is most likely to experience physical abuse, followed less frequently by sexual abuse. Emotional abuse almost always occurs with each physical and sexual abuse event and sometimes by itself. A child in this age range may have little memory of the abuse or may seem to have forgotten it completely.

However, a child can create dysfunctional thoughts and behaviours to try to diminish the impact of living with an abusive person. With repression of the memory of the abuse, a survivor is mystified as to why she behaves the way she does in certain situations. Having suffered abuse, a child becomes desensitised to violence and to her own physical feelings of pain. She begins to believe the cruel and abusive statements made about her. She thinks she is bad, not worthy, and doubts that any part of her can be good.

The child concludes that violence and pain are part of her everyday existence. Consequently, when required

to exhibit appropriate judgment about avoiding physical pain or violence, or to defend herself against derogatory statements, she may fail to take appropriate action. As a young child, she cannot adequately protect herself or articulate the emotional pain to an appropriate caretaker.

Physical, sexual, and emotional abuse also robs a child of the sense of trust in an authority figure. Under normal circumstances, a child's primary relationship with a parent becomes a model for future relationships in school, church and community. If a child cannot feel safe and protected in that primary relationship, she may not know how to form safe relationships with other people. She has learned early on that when an adult says "I love you," those words may mean bruises, pain or sexual violation.

Thus, in the future, she expects love and physical/emotional pain to go hand in hand. Out of fear that abuse will happen again, she finds it very difficult to engage in and enjoy loving and long-lasting relationships. Being vulnerable and dependent on others, the very young child normally sees the world as revolving around her and her needs. She is understandably the centre of her universe at this stage, and she assumes that people will do what she wants them to do.

When a young child is emotionally abused, her self-esteem is devastated, and she is likely to grow up feeling worthless. She will conclude that her ability to serve is unsatisfactory and that her efforts to enjoy life will not be rewarded. The young abused child may take on symptoms of depression that can become chronic. An emotionally abused child finds the world harsh and unpleasant. She may feel inadequately loved, unworthy of the unconditional love of Jesus Christ, and unable to participate in the joy of his full sacrifice.

There are some identifying signs of abuse in young children up to age five. Children rarely exhibit just one sign that they are the victims of abuse. Some symptoms may also represent developmental changes and not abuse. And, conversely, abuse may be taking place without symptoms being displayed, because of the child's ability to mask or deny what would otherwise be very confusing and painful to acknowledge.

Usually several signs seen together over a period of time suggest that a child may be suffering from abuse, although these may be difficult to read because they overlap with a child's growth changes. Some identifying signs of abuse in young children follow, some being more pertinent to certain kinds of abuse than to others:

- a. **Regression** – Change in behaviour to an earlier stage of development, e.g., thumb sucking, bed-wetting, baby talk or cuddling a baby blanket.
- b. **Sleeping pattern** – Changes such as sleeplessness, refusal to stay in bed, nightmares, or sleepwalking.
- c. **Social behaviour** – Changes in social behaviour, e.g., withdrawal, unhappiness, excessive crying or worrying, loss of appetite, nail biting, scratching or aggressive behaviour toward others.
- d. **Anger** – Excessive anger, hostility or violent disruption.
- e. **Physical symptoms** – Problems with bowel or urine control, vaginitis, bladder infections, genital warts or other signs of venereal disease; pain while urinating or defecating; rectal enlargement; lacerations of the rectal area or vaginal area; headaches; vomiting; persistent sore throats or unexplained gagging (due to a high intensity of forced oral sex).
- f. **Fears at home** – Fears about a particular area of the house, or fear of a particular family member.
- g. **Fear of others** – Fear of strangers (especially men) or strange situations.
- h. **Fear of touch** – Fear of being touched; shrugging away from physical contact; resistance to having diapers changed or to being examined; refusal to play with a previously favourite toy or refusal to participate in a favourite activity especially with a previously favourite person.
- i. **Language** – Explicit sexual language or statements that would indicate the child is involved in behaviour beyond her age-appropriate development.
- j. **Behaviour** – Attempting sexual behaviour with other people, either children or adults, e.g., wet kissing another child, unzipping a man's pants, attempting to insert any object into another child's rectum or vagina.

k. Injuries – Unexplained injuries and/or bruises, e.g., repeated self-inflicted injuries blamed on the child's carelessness or multiple bruises or injuries sustained in one event.

2. School Age – 6-12 Years

Children in this age range, like preschool children, are also at great risk of physical, sexual and emotional abuse. In addition, a child of this age is capable of remembering the abuse but may also repress and deny that it has occurred. An abused child feels ashamed of the abuse that took place and being different from other children her age. It does not occur to her that other children may also be victims.

The abused child also realises that she is powerless to fend off her abuser. In the case of sexual abuse she may try, unsuccessfully, to rebuff the violation. She may try to run away or hide from the abuser. She may pretend to be asleep while being sexually molested in bed by her abuser.

Abuse of any kind devastates school-age children. A child of this age views her circumstance in terms of the loss of power. Subsequently, she blames herself for not having sufficient power to overcome the abuser. This self-blame and guilt may become the lens through which she views her world. Consequently, whenever she experiences frustration or failure, she blames herself and feels inadequate. It may lead her either to under-achieve or to become a perfectionist. It may hold her back from striving for goals she no doubt could obtain if she did not feel inadequate and blameworthy.

This same feeling of powerlessness may also result in an inability to protect herself from abuse in later years, because she assumes that whatever happens to her, she somehow deserves it. The abuser transfers to her his view of reality, which is that "he is powerful; I am nothing."

Through the media, and even the church, this distorted view of gender relations may be tragically reinforced. Certainly, it is reinforced through the production and distribution of child pornography.

As with preschool children, school-age children can be desensitised to the experience of physical and sexual violence. A child of this age may align herself with the abuser and act aggressively or, in the case of sexual abuse, even promiscuously. She tends to generalise from her experience; she believes that most adults will act similarly. She cannot believe that anyone could care enough about her that he would want not to abuse her.

Most tragically, if her earthly father is capable of inflicting such pain, she generalises to the belief that her heavenly Father cannot really love her either.

This disbelief, of course, can lead to distrust and poor communication with peers, teachers, employers, ministers and elders, other family members, her spouse, or God.

The primary school age child can be aware of strong feelings of anger toward the abuser, although she cannot articulate these feelings well. However, the aggressive expression of such anger is likely to result in being labelled 'a problem child.' The resulting confusion may force this child to stuff her feelings inside her. At times, unexplained outbursts of pent-up anger result.

While a typical school-age child focuses on play activities, developing friendships, and practicing social skills, the abused child focuses on how to keep the abuser away from her. She may also try to protect younger brothers and sisters from being abused. In addition, she may assume a motherly role in the family.

This kind of role reversal, known as *parentification*, occurs when a child nurtures an adult and the adult behaves like a child. Role reversal is very evident in families with sexual abuse, because the daughter has a sexual relationship with her father, taking the place of her mother, who is often rejected by the father.

The sexually abused daughter is prematurely elevated to the status of an adult, and as a result she begins to take on other motherly roles in the family. She leaves her childhood prematurely and with resentment. Never able to satisfy the abusive adult partner, she leads a time-warped existence, not feeling at ease as a child anymore but totally inadequate for the adult role she is thrust into.

Emotional abuse during ages six to twelve years can lead a child to believe that she *cannot* master developmental skills and therefore will always be inadequate and inferior. Conversely, the child may strive to master these skills, hoping that her achievement or performance will become the criteria for her acceptance by others.

School-age children also reveal some warning signs that they may be victims of abuse. Again, not all children exhibit the same symptoms, nor are they likely to exhibit just one symptom. They are far more likely to exhibit several symptoms over a period of time. Some symptoms are present with abuse, but abuse may be occurring without these symptoms being visible.

Some possible indicators that a school-age child may be an abuse victim follow (again, some are more relevant to certain kinds of abuse than to others):

- a. **Physical symptoms** – Bladder infections, pain while urinating or defecating, loss of bladder or bowel control, venereal disease or genital warts, lacerations to the vaginal area or rectum, complaints of headaches, vomiting.
- b. **Injuries** – Multiple incidents of unexplained injuries or injuries assigned to the child's carelessness.
- c. **Patterns** – Changes in sleeping and eating patterns.
- d. **Fear** – Fear of the dark, of a particular room in the house, of strangers, of previously well-received relatives, and of certain situations, such as those requiring the removal of her clothes. There may also be the fear of being touched and of initiating any physical contact.
- e. **Day-dreaming** – Poor concentration or being prone to daydreaming in school.
- f. **Self-esteem** – Children may exhibit signs of low self-esteem or, oppositely, those of an over-achieving perfectionist who is eagerly trying to please by being compliant.
- g. **Stress** – Self-mutilation (cutting, scratching, etc), continual masturbation, or expressing anger through destruction of toys and objects.
- h. **Art** – Drawings of the abuse, particularly with details of adult genitals, breasts, pubic hair, or full nude figures.
- i. **Sex-oriented behaviour** – Age-inappropriate sexual behaviour with other children or with adults, use of explicit sexual language, making statements associated with sexual events or circumstances with which children that age are not normally familiar.
- j. **Emotions** – Anger, hostility, mood swings, irritability, oppositional behaviour, and violent disruptive tendencies.
- k. **General behaviour** – Lying, stealing, hoarding food, toys, or other objects, frequent absences from school, and 'blackouts' (periods of life that the child cannot recall or about which she has only vague memories).

3. *Adolescence*

The adolescent is most often a victim of *sexual* abuse and less likely to be a victim of physical abuse. Without doubt, each episode of physical or sexual abuse is accompanied by emotional abuse. However, some teenagers experience emotional abuse apart from physical and sexual abuse.

The adolescent victim can be a child victim whose abuse continues as she grows older, or she can become the victim of another abuser. With adolescence also comes the risk of being the victim of an abusive dating relationship.

In nearly every case of male adolescent sexual abuse, the abuser is also a male. The adolescent male victim interprets this experience as a homosexual attack, a violation of his masculine identity, a complete emasculation. To him his right to manhood has been denied. He may begin to question his sexual orientation and furthermore feel justified in *reclaiming* his masculinity. Unfortunately, the male adolescent victim often responds in anger, and to prove his own manhood, he strikes back by abusing a female.

The male adolescent victim feels a tremendous loss of power over his body. He reacts to this sense of powerlessness with a strong desire to dominate others. As an adolescent, he is in a position to dominate younger siblings and children. The adolescent male victim is often an abuser of siblings and of children he babysits, whether male or female. He exercises his dominance and his need to inflict pain on others to 'even the score.'

A young woman's emerging sense of *being* a woman is also jeopardised by physical and sexual abuse. She

no longer enjoys her physical blossoming into womanhood; rather, she senses her body as an object of provocation to others. In the case of sexual abuse, she associates her developing femininity with loss of control. The violation of her body reminds her of her vulnerability. She feels angry about her bodily development and about the perceived role of being a woman in our society.

During adolescence, body image becomes a serious issue for both male and female victims. Often abuse victims have a distorted view of their bodies, and this leads them to alter their bodies through excessive exercise, weight loss or gain, obsessive interest in body features, or preoccupation with sexual performance.

The adolescent female is a victim far more often than her male counterpart. Abuse interferes with her ability to achieve age-appropriate independence. She fears being alone and on her own; she may gravitate towards someone who vows to protect her, and this relationship in turn may confirm her inability to trust and care for herself. Frequently, such a relationship becomes abusive, but she feels trapped into staying in the relationship because she has not learned to care about or for herself.

The female adolescent victim of date abuse or date rape can be a child victim whose desire to leave an abusive family takes priority over sorting through her abuse issues. She misreads the affection and attention offered by the male suitor because her view of reality has been distorted by abuse within her family.

Another type of adolescent victim of date abuse is the teenager who is familiar with abuse dynamics in her own family and the family of her boyfriend and then attempts to 'cure' her boyfriend by meeting all his needs. He becomes demanding and angry when his every need is not met instantly on his terms, and he treats her abusively as a result. His abusive behaviour gives him a distorted sense of power and satisfaction, while she is left to wonder what she did to deserve it.

She blames herself and denies the abuse. She goes back to try to get it right. He may feel remorseful about his abuse of her and treat her well for a brief time. She is relieved by his apparent change in behaviour, and the cycle continues. Each repetition of the cycle keeps the couple trapped in their warped behaviour, reinforced by low self-esteem.

The adolescent abuse victim also feels she has lost control and the ability to protect herself. She becomes angry, rebels and often fights back, which sometimes results in further episodes of abuse. Occasionally her rebellion leads to alienation from the family.

A younger child cannot defend herself from abuse, but an adolescent thinks she *ought* to be able to fight back. She, too, blames herself for much of her abuse. In the case of sexual abuse, she feels dirty and violated. Paradoxically, she feels as if *everyone* and *no one* knows about her situation. She feels trapped by her circumstances because she doesn't want anyone to know that she can't take care of herself, that someone has violated her and has made her feel powerless and out of control. She feels overwhelming hurt and despair.

Although an adolescent has more control over her thoughts, feelings and behaviour than does a younger child, she may still reveal certain signals of abuse. The warning symptoms may be wider ranging, or, conversely, the adolescent may act in ways that hide abuse.

The signs listed below are only some guidelines, and usually there are more than one sign given over a period of time:

- a. ***injuries and complaints*** – Unexplained bruises, genital or rectal injury, and other types of injury. Physical complaints that are not easily diagnosed, such as chronic abdominal pain, gastric distress, and diarrhea or headaches. Uncontrolled bowel or bladder functions can still be present in adolescents.
- b. ***Eating disorders*** – Anorexia, bulimia, any unusual eating pattern, excessive use of laxatives, or sudden unexplained changes in weight or appetite.
- c. ***School behaviour*** – Steady decrease or plunge in grades. Conversely, excessive studying and attempts to over-achieve as a way of gaining adult approval.
- d. ***Social interaction*** – Difficulty in emotionally supporting peers or discomfort in interaction with them.
- e. ***Behaviour*** – Withdrawal from physical contact and avoidance of all touch, behaviour that sets her up for rejection or abandonment, getting into perpetual victimisation situations.

- f. Sexual behaviour* – Becoming sexually active, adopting a seductive manner around members of the opposite sex, manipulative sexual behaviour to win favour or approval of others, developing exploitable behaviour (e.g., teenage prostitution), or even becoming pregnant.
- g. Running away.*
- h. Self-abuse* – Suicidal thoughts or attempts, self-mutilation with cigarettes or razors, abuse of the breast or genital areas, tattoos, an excessive interest in weapons.
- i. Distrust and fear* – Exhibiting a pseudo-mature attitude; sometimes manifesting dis-trust of authority by acting out, including arson, stealing, cruelty to animals, chemical abuse, truancy, and more.
- j. Depression* – Suicidal thinking, depression, unexplained fears, worries, or diffuse anxiety.
- k. Fear of nudity* – Fear of removing clothes (such as in gym class) or of being examined by a physician.
- l. Numbness to feeling.*
- m. Hygiene* – Refusal to attend to basic hygiene or normal health habits and routines.

3.4 Pastoral Concerns

The session and the church must endeavour to be at the forefront of the healing process. The minister, especially, can play (1) a *preventative* role through preaching and through catechism and adult education; (2) a *coordinating* role for church and community response; and (3) an ongoing *pastoral-care* role. In addition, together with the session, he may need to be a sensitive administrator of church discipline.

When one considers the possible extent of abuse in the churches, and what the statistics say about its prevalence in the community – the communities we want to evangelise for Christ and bring into the church – it becomes clear that ministers in particular, but also elders and deacons, must invest time in educating themselves about all aspects of abuse within the family and within circles of acquaintances. This can occur through reading, workshops, resource persons.

It would seem imperative that the practical theology curriculum at the Reformed Theological College include a course on “abuse within the family.” In such a course, students could come to some understanding of how abuse is interwoven into a family’s functioning and how it maintains the abuser’s emotional balance.

It could also be a setting for facing personal experiences of abuse, because church leaders have not been spared childhood abuse and need to face abusive tendencies in themselves.

Gaining sensitivity to abusive power relationships will help the session members, and ministers especially, at every level of church work, because being leaders in a male-led denomination requires a clear distinction of servant power from dominance power.

The weekly preaching and teaching gives the minister more opportunities than any other person to do preventative teaching about abuse. As Reformed ministers, recognising the need to preach on sin (that leads to repentance and forgiveness), we can now pinpoint some of sin’s outworking in family relationships.

The following are possible sermon topics: honouring father and mother, living purely with sex, the equality in Christ of men and women, Israel’s exile as punishment for social injustice, the power of the tongue, the Christian lifestyle as characterised by gentleness and self-control.

Matter-of-factly, the minister can include in his sermons the fact that Christians struggle with tendencies to misuse power against those nearest to them – sexual power, physical power, emotional power. From the preaching can go out a call to those who struggle as abusers, a call to those keeping silent about abuse, a call to those who do any type of pastoral visiting: get help, stop, take responsibility, face what is happening. This will help to free those involved from feelings of helplessness and isolation.

3.4.1 Child Victims

1. Therapy

Child and adolescent victims of abuse ought to be in counselling as soon as the abuse is disclosed. A

child/adolescent ought to have her own therapist so that the therapist can deal intensively with all related concerns: trust; anger; sexual, developmental and spiritual issues; problems related to disclosure and testimony; and the learning of appropriate coping skills. Group therapy tends to be well suited to children or adolescents who become very supportive of each other in such a context. The non-abusing parent or a relative ought to become involved with the child's therapy at the point when the therapist feels it is in the child's best interest to do so.

2. *Self-protection*

Soon after disclosure, a child or adolescent victim must be taught self-protection techniques, most likely by the therapist. Amid the family turmoil after a disclosure has been made, the non-abusing family members may not be able to provide such techniques. The school environment provides an ideal place to teach children self-protection techniques, preferably prior to, but certainly when necessary, after an abuse event. Sunday school settings are also appropriate because the lessons can provide a biblical basis for teaching children reverence for their own bodies and those of others.

3. *Appropriate Behaviour*

The child or adolescent needs to learn about appropriate touching and healthy sexual relationships. She needs to know how to channel her sexual feelings as well as to protect herself against anyone's attempt to violate her body. She also needs to learn how to desire appropriate intimacy and how to let a feeling of trust grow in a relationship. Assuming that the role model for intimacy is absent in the abusive family, the child victim needs to be in a relationship in which bonds of trust can be built again. Ideally the non-abusive parent will be in therapy to learn how to assume some of this responsibility.

4. *Affirmation*

The church community ought to affirm its support of a victim, especially while she is in the process of giving court evidence. If the child is not supported and well represented in the legal processes, she will feel that her abuse experience is being trivialised. Failure to support the victim may re-confirm her fear that her world is out of control, that she is not truly valued, and that she is indeed helpless.

5. *Wise Support*

A child will often look to an adult to rescue her from a horrible situation. She desperately clutches the idea that someone will magically take away all her pain or guarantee that she will never be hurt again. Adult responders may not offer to a child that which they cannot deliver. They should avoid statements such as "you can always trust me," or "I am your friend; you can tell me anything," or "I would never hurt you like that."

6. *God's Love*

The church must affirm to child and adolescent victims their uniqueness as image bearers of God. These children need to learn and, more importantly, to *feel* that God is loving and nurturing, faithful and trustworthy. God is not abusive or hurtful. When parents abuse, they – not God – are the ones who deserve *not* to be called *mother* or *father*. Children and adults are all created in God's image, even though procreated through their mothers and fathers. Children should neither be afraid of God nor be afraid to address him as *Father*, for God is both Father and Mother – the ultimate role model for parents and caretakers, boys and girls, fathers and mothers.

3.4.2 Pastoral Care

The minister can play an important role in the appropriate handling of abuse issues that arise in the church. The minister may be one of the first people an abuse victim approaches. He has an excellent opportunity to be part of the healing process. That the minister take the matter seriously and not minimise the situation is critically important.

Ministers should have a basic understanding of the dynamics of abuse situations and of dysfunctional families.

Sometimes the minister will be caught in a family situation in which the victim and the alleged abuser are at odds about what did or did not happen. It is very important that the victim be believed unless contrary evidence is overwhelming. False denials of sexual abuse are more frequent than are false reports.

However, a calm, understanding attitude toward the abuser can help resolve the problem. The minister is not an investigator and does not need to determine guilt or innocence.

The minister should refer the situation to the appropriate community agencies. This, of course, requires that the minister be aware of these resources. Each session should make it a point that a file is kept on such resources.

In the case of child abuse, the proper government authority, such as the Department of Community Services (DOCS), should be contacted. Each Australian State government has legislation that demands anyone who knows of abuse against a child to report such a crime. Mandatory reporting, such as is required for teachers, medical personnel, counsellors is now also applicable to ministers of religion. The CRCA Safe Church Unit has documented processes for this reporting in place.

If and when government agencies become involved, the minister can still support the victim and the family. Often the legal process intimidates family members, and they are afraid to ask questions. At times their emotional state is such that they do not hear clearly what is being said. A minister can accompany and support family members who must go to the police or to court.

It is important, too, that the minister support the children as well as the adults. Too often a child sees the minister seated only next to her mother or father and not next to her. The child perceives this as a rejection of herself even though she is the victim. Another church member, perhaps an elder, could support the parents, thus avoiding this problem. In general, the abused and the abuser should not have overlapping support systems.

At times it may be necessary for a child to be separated from her parents for a brief period while the investigation is going on. The minister may be able to find a family who can provide temporary shelter while a more permanent plan is being devised. This would, of course, require the approval of the authorities involved.

The above are concrete, practical suggestions. However, the minister must remember that abuse in a family profoundly affects both the victim's and the abuser's view of God, both as a father figure and as a loving God. The minister should therefore attend to the special social and spiritual needs of families where abuse occurs.

3.5 Additional issues for the church

Because our Reformed Churches are very much family orientated, the church needs to help families live abuse-free lives so that all members can feel safe within their own families.

Family members need to feel when they are hurting or mistreated that they can get help from their minister or elders. By being sensitive to all the struggles of their congregation, ministers enable the church members to report any abuse and to seek help for their pain.

When ministers invite people to reveal their need for private discussion about their experience, they open the door for victims to seek help and become growing survivors.

The Lord promises abundant life to all his people (John 10:10). To assure a victim that God's abundant life is also for an abuse victim, the minister must help her find relief from the bondage of the past and liberty to experience new freedom in Christ.

3.5.1 Trust

Survivors of abuse need help in learning to trust again. Their past experience with people who were supposed to have made their world safe has shattered their faith in people. For self-protection, victims have withdrawn emotionally from people and often from God as well. This is particularly true if the abusers were fathers, grandfathers, or other older persons to whom one would naturally look for protection and respect.

Survivors live with fear, often of the people closest to them, and this fear generates isolation, loneliness, and self-imposed silence. The initial focus of their re-learning must be on the restoration of trust in order that they may grow spiritually.

Ministers can do several things to restore the survivor's faith in herself, in others and in God. To understand the survivor's experiences and emotions, the pastoral counsellor needs to listen carefully. The survivor urgently needs someone to hear her out, to respect and to accept her unconditionally.

She (more than a male victim) will likely need to talk with a woman instead of, or in addition to, a male minister. To trust any man after her abuse experience may be too difficult. As she shares her pain, she can move out of emotional isolation into genuine fellowship with another caring person. In this way she can experience the return of hope and faith.

Author James Leehan writes:

Spiritual directors for survivors of abuse must seek to instil in them a faith and trust in themselves and their potential for growth, a trust in their anger as a measure of injustice, and a trust in their own anguish as a call for new direction in their lives. This trust can enable survivors to celebrate their dignity and self-worth. It can enable survivors to fulfil the prerequisite for Jesus' second great commandment. They will learn to love themselves so they can "love... your neighbour as yourself" (Luke 10:27). They will be reconciled to themselves, freed from self-hate, and enabled to feel compassion for themselves. Then they can recognise and trust a caring God. This trust can heal. It can cast out fear.

*(Pastoral Care for Survivors
of Family Abuse, Louisville,
Westminster/John Knox, 1989, p 102)*

3.5.2 Guilt and Shame

Survivors of abuse commonly experience feelings of guilt and shame. The minister must be very sensitive to the victims' damaged self-esteem as well as to the negative feelings or perceptions that accompany a collapsed self-concept. Abusers and those who support abusers by silent consent or defensive action will often blame the victim for the abuser's offensive actions. Survivors, who are usually young and very vulnerable, then begin to believe that they themselves are responsible and that they are bad persons.

This belief lies at the root of much emotional disturbance in child survivors, and the victim can carry these feelings throughout life if therapeutic intervention is not initiated.

Survivors of sexual abuse tend to believe that the evil done to them is only of a sexual nature. They need to understand that such abuse was really violence. They were victims of crimes; they were not active participants. They also need to understand that even though they have lost their sexual innocence, they are valued as human persons, image bearers of God. The minister and other church members need to personally affirm and emphasise that the victims also are God's children, members of the "chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God" (1 Pet 2:9).

3.5.3 Anger and Forgiveness

Survivors of abuse, no matter what kind, must learn to cope constructively with their feelings of anger. Their anger is justified, for it is a recognition of the injustice they have experienced. They may display their anger in a generally hostile attitude toward the world or toward God.

Children often display an unfocused anger at the world or at people around them. They may act out those feelings in aggressive verbal abuse of others, assaults, property destruction, and fire setting. Some survivors internalise their anger, directing it at themselves and becoming depressed. Some survivors have repressed angry feelings so effectively, out of fear of reprisals by perpetrators, that in counselling sessions they may initially show denial of anger or resentment.

The pastoral counsellor or therapist can help victims to become aware of their anger. Victims need to focus their anger on the abuser and his deeds of violence. When victims become aware of their anger and focus it on the abuser who caused the suffering, they can express appropriate emotion and take steps toward resolving the emotional pain and conflict. Anger properly focused can be an energiser; it enables victims, with spiritual or moral guidance, to become confident survivors who have a finely tuned sense of justice and who are capable of practicing love again (Mt 22:37-40).

Is forgiveness possible? At best, it is very difficult. Forgiveness cannot be hurried. Well-meaning but misguided Christians or family members with a forgive-and-forget attitude may insist on immediate forgiveness. Such spiritual counselling serves the needs of others, not the needs of the survivors.

Survivors of abuse may need a year or even a lifetime to be ready to forgive. Forgiveness cannot and may not be hurried. While Jesus was able to pray on the cross for God's forgiveness of his abusers, human beings are not God; they may need a lot of time to work out this issue. Church leaders involved in pastoral care of abuse survivors need to understand how long the process of forgiveness and healing can be.

In Luke 17:3-4 forgiveness is required *when the offender has been confronted and repents*. This implies a sincere confession and change of life by the offender. He must not just acknowledge his guilt; he must also be willing to undergo personal therapy with a qualified therapist as part of the repentance process. He needs this to get at the roots of his abusive behaviour and to reduce the probability of its recurrence. If the abuser fulfills these requirements, then the survivor may be able to forgive.

Full reconciliation may not always be possible, since survivors are human, and perpetrators are not always available or willing to confess and repent. But forgiveness can help the survivor gradually to let go the bitterness in her heart and to be freed of its power. The pastoral counsellor also needs to be acquainted with the scholarly and pastoral writings about forgiveness.

3.5.4 God's Love

"If Jesus loves me, why did he let my father abuse me?" a thirteen-year-old survivor of sexual abuse asked her chaplain. That question is difficult and painful, especially when it comes from a child. Survivors often need to make some sense out of their experience.

Questions about God's involvement or lack of it are bound to arise, and they should not be avoided or stifled. But there are no simple explanations. Ever since the book of Job was written, people have tried to comprehend the meaning of their suffering. Jesus himself struggled with the issue when he cried, "*My God, why have you forsaken me?*" Survivors often feel this sense of being forsaken and look for a renewed assurance of God's love.

Ministers need to assure survivors that God never wants abuse and violence for his people. Ministers must assure survivors that God loves them deeply and wants only the best for them. Through the mouth of Jeremiah (29:11) God has said, "*For I know the plans I have for you... plans to give you hope and a future.*" Such divine love is communicated to survivors not only by means of verbal assurances but also most powerfully by human messengers of love, who can be Christ's love incarnate to survivors. If survivors can experience such love and acceptance because they are valued human beings, they can learn to enjoy the blessings of the abundant life that Jesus brings to them.

3.5.5 Abuse by Ministers

We have shown that ministers can provide an invaluable service to victims of abuse when they carefully and lovingly "*feed the lambs and tend the sheep*" (John 20:15-16). The pastoral office is a position involving tremendous trust and responsibility.

However, sometimes the ministers in the church violate the trust and power associated with their office. There have been those in our churches who have abused their family members or church members. Such behaviour violates biblical standards for individual and pastoral conduct. When such unethical conduct occurs, sessions must do all they can to practice both justice and mercy toward the offender as well as toward the church members who have been victimised.

The members' sense of trust and safety must be restored by temporary suspension of the accused minister from his office. Such suspension must continue while honest and forthright steps are taken to investigate the accusations and to firmly deal with any confirmed unethical behaviour on the part of the minister. In some cases deposition from office may be the only option. The general guidelines for such discipline are, of course, found in the [CRCA Church Order](#).

Most Australian denominations have now written procedures for responding to complaints of unethical behaviour by clergy, especially sexual abuse. Abuse by clergy undermines the credibility of the ministerial profession and ultimately of the gospel itself. Prevention of such abuse and appropriate discipline for its occurrence are of paramount importance for the health of the church. The CRCA has the "Healing a Broken Trust" document to effectively guide sessions through the process of dealing with abuse by office bearers.

3.5.6 Teamwork

Because of the complexity and difficulty of the healing process, it is important to divide the pastoral and therapeutic work among a team of people. The team, however, must both maintain communication among its members and maintain appropriate confidentiality. A therapist with skill and experience working with survivors and perpetrators must be involved.

The survivor and the abuser need separate individual and/or group counselling. The minister must encourage, even insist, that both abuser and abused undertake counselling; both should be supported with prayer and encouraged as they grapple with this painful process. As a rule, both men and women need to be involved with the abused and the abuser in the emotional and spiritual healing process.

3.5.7 Family

Pastoral care also needs to be directed to other family members. The married adult survivor of abuse often has a difficult relationship with her husband, partly as a result of the previous abuse. The husband needs to know what his wife has experienced and is experiencing; he needs to be encouraged to live patiently with her as she faces her past.

The husband may need education about the process in which his wife is involved and how he can help or hinder her in her struggle. He himself may need a listening ear as he experiences frustration in living with her as she uncovers successive levels of grief and pain. What may appear to others as a 'minor' case of abuse may set off severe reactions later in life in the person abused.

The wife of an abuser also needs care. Questions about abuse of other immediate or extended family members need to be asked. The marital relationship of the abuser and his wife needs to be addressed in a professional, therapeutic setting.

3.5.8 General Guidance

It is important to realise that this Report is not a manual that can be quickly read and used by anyone who hears of abuse and wants to deal with the problem. The emotions and feelings of survivors are powerful and must be handled with care.

Just confiding in another person, perhaps after years, unleashes many pent-up feelings in survivors, and an insensitive word hurts, e.g., "What did you do to *invite* this deed?" or "Have you ever *complained* to anyone before?" The suggestions following are guidelines. What *not* to do is as important as what to *do*.

Ministers and their fellow session members, unless specifically trained, are not trained abuse counsellors. However, they can be very useful in securing help and in supporting the survivor in her recovery.

They should be aware that for a hurting person an empathetic and caring ear may be so welcome that it is possible for the survivor to become emotionally attached to them.

The minister, for example, may be perceived as the first caring or influential adult to hear and believe her story. This attachment may lead to a transference of dependency, that is, the caring person may become the object of strong feelings (positive or negative) that the victim has not previously worked through toward the abuser.

The church must not arbitrarily set a time frame for healing to occur. It may be expedient for a minister and elder to suggest several strategies for the survivor to follow, but ultimately the therapist and survivor together must judge when, for example, confrontation with the perpetrator should take place, regardless of whether such a time frame causes a problem for the church session.

If the abuser and the abused are in the same congregation or classis, the need of the abuser or the session to "have things resolved" should *not* take precedence over the victim's healing process.

3.6 Conclusion

When in the beginning our Creator blessed the human race, he enabled male and female, adult and child to enjoy both creation and each other in harmony and fellowship with him. We have fallen a long way. That abuse permeates every social, economic and racial stratum of society is true.

Nevertheless, we cannot and may not ignore the fact that the vast majority of abusers are adult males and that the vast majority of victims are women and children. If the male members of our denomination humbly acknowledge this reality and show themselves prepared to deal with it, we will have taken a major step toward creating a church that is safe for all its members.

The church's educational and social programmes must enable males and females to relate to each other respectfully and freely. Each must recognise the other person's unique and precious contribution to the whole body.

As surely as God's cultural blessing has enabled humanity to be what he intended, so must we bless one another; that is, the pattern of our relating to each other must be such that it enables others, male and female, children and adults, to become all that God wants them to be.

This Report is not a final cure for the pain of abuse that is so tragic and real among us. We do, however, offer it with the prayer and hope that it will contribute to the growth of *shalom* in our denomination.

Appendix 1: Adverse Childhood Experiences

The Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse (2013-2017) conducted more than 8,000 interviews with survivors of sexual abuse highlighting the serious abuse that happened in religious institutions. While many will suggest that this deals with historical abuse, everyone is confronted daily with reports in the media that abuse of minors is still occurring. The ABS Statistics confirm the statistics shown in this report and shows that abuse has not decreased. More recent studies have identified links between child abuse (trauma) and their physical and mental development. Referred to as Adverse Childhood Experiences, these have a significant impact on later life.

What are ‘ACEs’?

Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) is a term used to describe very stressful events or circumstances that children may experience during their childhood. The term was introduced in a seminal 1998 US study on the impact of childhood abuse and neglect and household challenges on later-life health and wellbeing (n = 17,337) (Felitti et al., 1998).

This early study showed an association between adverse experiences in childhood and potentially profound impacts on later health and social functioning. Twenty years of extensive international research has since shown a strong predictive relationship between the number of ACEs one is exposed to as a child, and the probability of physical health, mental health and social and behavioural problems occurring through childhood into adult life, and being passed on to the next generation (Hughes et al., 2017).

The most widely recognised and researched ACEs relate to abuse, neglect and household adversities, and include:

- childhood physical, sexual and emotional abuse
- physical neglect and emotional neglect
- exposure to family violence
- parental substance use
- parental mental illness
- parental separation or divorce; and
- parental incarceration.

There is a misconception that these adversities are experienced only, or predominantly, by certain population sub-groups. While children from lower socioeconomic positions have a greater risk of experiencing ACEs (Walsh, McCartney, Smith & Armour, 2019), research consistently shows that individuals across all demographics can be exposed to ACEs. An estimated 72% of Australian children have been exposed to at least one ACE, with this rate being higher in some vulnerable Australian populations e.g. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders (Zubrick et al., 2005), juvenile offenders (Baglivio et al., 2014), and children involved in welfare services (Kerker et al., 2015).

The impact of ACEs on health and functioning

During childhood and adolescence, exposure to ACEs can result in significant developmental delays, lower educational attainment and social and emotional maladjustment. ACEs are also associated with the onset of substance use disorders (Dube, Cook & Edwards, 2010), eating disorders (Williamson, Thompson, Anda, Dietz & Felitti, 2002), self-harming behaviours (Felitti & Anda, 2010; McLaughlin, Koenen, Bromet & Karam, 2017), PTSD, schizophrenia (McLaughlin, Koenen, Bromet & Karam, 2017), depression, and anxiety disorders (Choi, DiNitto, Marti & Choi, 2017).

Exposure to ACEs increases the risk of chronic and cardiovascular conditions in adulthood. The more ACEs a child is exposed to, the greater their risk of developing a range of chronic and cardiovascular conditions as adults – regardless of the particular combination of ACEs experienced. These diseases were also found to develop at an earlier age in those exposed to ACEs. Individuals with six or more ACEs have been found to die 20 years earlier than those exposed to none (Felitti et al., 1998).

Appendix 2: A biblical view regarding child sexual abuse

We are all well aware of the ‘Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse’. The Catholic Church has received the brunt of the criticism against the churches due to the number of paedophile priests. But the issue of sexual abuse is important for all of us as Christians. The Belief Blocker research¹ found that the ‘...number one blocker to Christian belief among non Christian Australians is the issue of hypocrisy and abuse within the church’². It goes on to say:

‘When abuse of children occurs within the church it is an especially deplorable crime and a horrendous breach of trust. It’s hard to think of a more appalling obscenity than innocent children entrusted to an institution that is, at heart, supposed to be about love, care and protection of the vulnerable and the weak, instead finding a place of the worst kind of betrayal and cruelty’³.

With that thought we can understand the belief blocker question: ‘Do the sexual abuse scandals within the Church call the Christian faith into question?’

I want to reflect on that question by looking at Matthew 18:1-6. It will help us develop a biblical response. The opening scene is that we see (Matthew 18:1) *“At that time the disciples came to Jesus and asked ‘Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?’”* The context is that the disciples of Jesus had been bickering in the background *“...as to which of them would be the greatest”* (Luke 9:46). We can imagine a jealous power struggle developing amongst the twelve. You see in Matthew 16 Peter had said of Jesus *“You are the Christ, the son of the living God”*. To which Jesus had replied ‘you are Peter (which means ‘rock) and on this rock I will build my church’. In chapter 17 we see Peter, James and John are the three who go up the mountain to see Jesus transfigured in all glory as he meets with Moses and Elijah. It’s not hard to imagine the other disciples being jealous, bickering about who is more special. But it is galling to see this power struggle after Jesus has announced to them that he must suffer and die. We can see the brokenness of the folk in the church. These are the people for whom Jesus will die. These are the men to whom he will entrust the message of the gospel. Basically they are provoking each other to sin. They are causing bitterness and rivalry amongst themselves. It is to this issue of power and greatness that Jesus makes his response here.

We see that Jesus (18:2) *“...called a little child and had him stand among them.”* We see that children, even little ones were often hanging around Jesus. They could sense his gentleness and love for them. In a society that took little notice of children Jesus acknowledged them, saw them and protected them. So he calls the little one over. Why? As a demonstration of the point he is about to make. (18:3&4): *“He said ‘I tell you the truth, unless you change and become like little children you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Therefore whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.”* You can see how he starts off *“I tell you the truth”*. So you know it’s going to be profound. In other words ‘You had better listen to this and get it clear in your heads’. What he says is strong stuff. ‘Guys, unless you change your attitude you won’t even get into the kingdom let alone be some one great in that kingdom! If you want to be part of my kingdom, and be great in it, you need to be humble like this child’.

Now we know that children can be stubborn and naughty. But what Jesus is highlighting with that toddler in their midst is humility. Little children are simple, unpretentious, very limited in strength and knowledge, they are trusting. It is this humble trust that Jesus is getting at. A person must humble themselves before God and trust him. Those who live out of that humility and trust are the ones who will do great things for God. It is exactly how Jesus did great things. He brought forgiveness and hope, by humbling himself. He as God got on his knees to serve. He humbled himself all the way to the cross. What is fascinating here in our text is to see how close Jesus identifies himself with the little ones. He connects intimately with those who humble themselves and trust him. (18:5) *“And whoever welcomes a little child like this in my name welcomes me.”* Remember Jesus said *“I am the vine you are the branches”*. We are his body, his voice and hands. If you

¹ ‘Australian Communities Report; research into key belief blockers and questions about faith, Christianity and God held by Australians today’, commissioned by Olive Tree Media, conducted by McCrindle Research www.olivetreemedia.com.au

² ‘Towards Belief: discussion guide’ Executive producer Karle Faase 2013 Olive Tree Media p41

³ Ibid

touch a believer you touch Jesus. If you touch a little child who humbly trusts Jesus you touch God. It is impossible to separate God from his people. As Zechariah 2:8 says “...for whoever touches you (Israel) touches the apple of God's eye.” Touch God's people and you are poking God in the eye, so to speak. You are poking him in his most sensitive area, what is most precious to him. Christians don't just believe in a system. We don't just follow Jesus' teachings. We are one with him, we are united to him. His Spirit in us is our life. So how you treat a Christian is how you treat Jesus. When you 'receive' anyone who belongs to Jesus, when you welcome them as a guest, when you treat them with care and protection, with kindness and love, you are doing that to Jesus. No matter if it is a humble older Christian, or a child in church, no matter if they are lacking in sophistication or power, or fame; if they are dirt poor and completely vulnerable, the way you treat Christ's little ones, is the way you welcome Jesus.

Now what we have just said has enormous implications! Look at what Jesus says next. Jesus says some of the most frightening words we find him speaking in the Bible. (18:6) “*But if anyone causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to have a large millstone hung around his neck and to be drowned in the depths of the sea.*” Jesus speaks here of an upper-millstone that was used in grinding grain. It was so large and heavy it had to be harnessed to a donkey by a large beam so the stone could be turned by brute force. Tie that around a man's neck and throw him into the sea he would sink very fast to the bottom and never come back up. Jews didn't drown people for any kind of crime. It was to them a horrible, unimaginable punishment. To be drowned all alone with a millstone around your neck in some far off region of the ocean was terrifying. The Romans did that. The Jews didn't.

Now I say it reverently but Jesus is almost using mafia language here; promising to send some off to sleep with the fishes if they tamper with any of his believing little ones. But if you look carefully again at that verse it is actually much worse than that. Jesus is not just saying if you touch his little one you should have a millstone tied around your neck. But that you would be better off if such were done compared to that will happen to you. Jesus is warning that an unspeakable worse destiny awaits such a person than anything that could be done with a millstone. That would be temporary compared to the eternal judgement that God will hand out. So clearly Jesus is giving notice to everyone, in the church or outside the church, never to mess with any of his little believing ones. Don't you dare cause them to sin! Don't you dare interfere with their faith. Don't you dare hinder them from coming to Jesus. Don't you dare tempt them away from Jesus. You will most certainly answer to the judge of all the earth if you do.

You can picture the disciples being completely dumbstruck by the passion of Jesus. You can see them stunned, their jaws dropped, by the violence in his language. But it was essential they got the message. They had been on their struggle for power, making each other jealous, resentful and spiteful. They were causing each other to sin. In that sense they were hurting others instead of protecting them. But protecting others is the essential role of those who represent Jesus. That was the calling of the disciples in forming the church. If a person comes into the kingdom through humble trust, then those who lead the church must themselves act in humility and service as Jesus did. If the kingdom is for the humble, for the 'little ones', for those who are weak and vulnerable then they need to be cared for. They need to be protected; especially so if they are literally small children. The Apostle Paul said very specifically in Acts 20, as he instructed the elders: “*Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. Be shepherds of the church of God which he bought with his own blood.*” That last part tells us how dear the church is to Jesus. He died for her. It cost him his life. 'Look after her' Paul is saying. 'She is precious'. To fail to protect them and even worse to cause some one in the church to lose faith in God is a huge offence against God.

How does this apply to our question on abuse in the church? When you read about priests, ministers, church workers who abuse children they can make out that what they do with the children is a 'beautiful thing', its being 'intimate' with them. It is 'showing love' they say. There have been times when the church in trying to theologically define sexual abuse has used the concept of 'adultery'. That is wrong. Child sexual abuse should never be seen in terms of sexual intimacy. It must be seen in terms of abuse of power. It is a complete failure of office. It is a betrayal of trust towards the vulnerable. It is a misuse of the position and authority of ministry to force an indecency on a vulnerable person. It is a theft of the innocence of the child. It is to strip a child of their dignity for one's own personal gratification. It is in no way a sharing of love. It is a crime. It is a betrayal of their trust in God. Church leaders are called upon by Jesus to care for his little ones. They are to

nurture and protect them. It is a betrayal of the trust of the members of the church as well as the community. It is a betrayal of God. You touch one of God's little ones and you touch him.

A church leader, who sexually abuses a child, as Jesus puts it 'causes the little one to sin'. Sin at heart is turning away from God, it hinders faith. It stops a person from coming to Jesus. Research has shown that sexual abuse does not only have profound and lasting psychological effects. It also has major damaging affects on their faith. Sexual abuse can make it difficult to accept what we believe about God. For example God is all powerful, but he did not rescue that child from abuse. God is love, yet he allowed an innocent child to suffer torment. God hates evil, but he did nothing to prevent the abuse. Sexual abuse has been described as 'the murder of the soul'. A number of studies have shown that victims of serious sexual abuse are less likely than people in the general population to have a religious commitment in adulthood. That is the case even though they were brought up in a religious home. The destructive affects of sexual abuse on a person's faith are likely to be even more considerable where the perpetrator is a priest or minister because the sense of betrayal is so great⁴.

How should the church respond when it comes to child sexual abuse? Like Jesus there should be a deep sense of rage. Jesus said to his power hungry disciples 'don't you dare cross that line, don't you dare cause a little one to sin'. We as a church should say to our leaders 'don't you dare cross that line of sexual abuse. If you do we will hit you with the full force of the law. We will not cover it up. We will not shift you elsewhere. We will go straight to the police. You will feel our anger at your betrayal of office. We will let you feel the anger of Jesus at your betrayal of him'. We should respond by being open and listening to the stories of those abused. We should support them with our love and prayers and help in counselling. And the church in general should apologise to the community. In too many cases there has been a failure to deal with sexual abuse in a just manner. And that has caused the community to falter in wanting to hear the gospel. So coming back to the main question: 'Do the sexual abuse scandals within the Church call the Christian faith into question?' we have to confess they do. That is the affect. The Christian faith is about being childlike in humility and trust. It is having faith in a gentle, generous gracious God who raises the humble. It is about imitating Christ's humility who submitted himself to the cross. It is about being shepherds who care for God's people, his children, the apple of his eye. The church needs to step aside from its position of power and be humble and admit we have failed those abused, we have failed the community and above all we have failed Jesus. If we are going to be the church, the proclaimer of the gospel, the body of Christ on earth, then we should have the rage of Jesus against those who abuse his little ones. And we must have his passion for the care of those dear to him. To do less is to fail to represent our Lord.

⁴ Parkinson, Patrick; 'Child Sexual Abuse and the Churches: Understanding the Issues'; Aquila Press, 2003