

Abuse - A Christadelphian Response

We would like to believe that the growing incidence of reported abuse in the general community has no relevance to the Christadelphian community. However, the increased incidence of reported abuse within our ecclesias tells us differently.

Not only are people finding the courage to acknowledge the wrongs that have been done to them in the past, but also reports of recent abuse within the ecclesias continue to be made. By allowing this to happen, our fellowship supports the healing process of those who have been damaged. By increasing our awareness of the problem, we have a greater opportunity to address it.

For too long, we have believed the myth that the ecclesia is a safe place, removed from the evil that is in the world. Our reluctance to face the truth has meant that some children (those under 16) have continued being exposed to the chance of abuse.

What is abuse?

Abuse is any act or attitude that hurts another individual by denigrating that person's self-worth. Abuse occurs whenever a person (or group of persons) in a position of power in relation to another, takes advantage of that position to control the feelings and thinking of the other. Abuse is about control.

Abuse can take obvious or subtle forms, and stems from a lack of respect for the victim. There are five common forms of abuse:

- **Physical:** excessive discipline, hitting, beating, shaking, shoving etc.
- **Verbal:** name-calling, teasing, put-downs, blaming, threatening, sarcasm, etc.
- **Psychological/Emotional:** rejection, lack of love or support. All forms of abuse cause psychological trauma, negatively affecting the way we think and feel about ourselves and others. The exposure of children to domestic violence is now also considered to be emotional abuse.
- **Spiritual:** control and manipulation of another by evoking fear of God, or using guilt language.
- **Sexual:** any behaviour directed at the sexual arousal of one or both parties, which is

imposed on one of the parties by the other, i.e., the victim's wishes are not respected.

Whenever we belittle others, or hurt or manipulate them, that is abuse.

The remainder of this leaflet will deal with the subject of sexual abuse for 3 reasons:

- a) The subject of sexual abuse has been taboo in most ecclesial groups until recently,
- b) A growing number of members feel compelled to tell the truth about what happened to them, and
- c) It is both spiritually and legally essential for us to take care of the flock of God.

Sexual Abuse

Sexual abuse happens to children and adults, to males and females, both within and outside marriage. In the case of children, while it is true that abuse of females is nearly twice as common as that of males, it is important to acknowledge that both sexes are affected, and both need to be protected.

Abusive behaviours may include

- i) inappropriate conversations or written communications of a sexual nature,
- ii) unwarranted and inappropriate touching,
- iii) involving children, young people or disadvantaged people in sexual acts,
- iv) exposure of children or young people to the sexual behaviour of others, including pornography and R-rated or X-rated videos.

Whatever has been imposed, the unwilling party feels betrayed, invaded and violated.

Often the offender takes pains to create guilt and shame in the victim to ensure secrecy. When the victim has been involved in sexual activity imposed by the other, the emotional damage is often profound because of the sense of violation of one's personal being. Physical damage may result from sexual abuse, and spiritual damage can also occur, especially if the victim feels abandoned by God at a time of great need.

Sexual abuse, especially of children, is a very destructive act of controlling and abusive behaviour. Often memories are repressed for many years and the healing process can be long and painful.

The Emotional Impact of Sexual Abuse

Shock and Confusion. Sexual abuse is particularly confusing for children who lack the emotional and intellectual ability to cope with a premature introduction to sexuality imposed by an adolescent or adult. Often it is someone they love who is hurting them and this is extremely perplexing. Their world is no longer safe.

Guilt. The victim almost always feels at least partially responsible for, and therefore guilty about, the abuse. Sometimes special rewards or favours are received as part of the abusive relationship. Some victims believe that in some way they deserve the abuse.

Fear. Fear of being found out and fear of rejection by parents or friends are very common reactions.

Anger. Anger is felt towards the perpetrator, towards others who failed to protect them, towards God who did not help them, and towards themselves for being powerless to stop the abuse.

Loss of trust in children. Most child sexual abuse is committed by a family member or friend, and this makes the loss of trust in others, in authority figures, and in God, one of the most devastating effects of child sexual abuse. When the abuse perpetrator comes from outside the family, the child becomes unable to trust in the parents' protection. Often child victims assume that the parents know. Sadly, they are sometimes right.

Recovery and Healing

The damage caused by abuse can rob the victim of a personal sense of worth, leaving self-hatred, fear, depression and anger. In such cases, recovery can take a long time, and requires real commitment and courage.

These are some of the steps in the healing process:

- Accepting and letting go of the feelings of anger, grief and fear.
- Dealing with shame and guilt; learning to believe that God loves them just as they are.
- Choosing to be free from the control of past events.
- Coming to grips with current life issues, such as depression, compulsive behaviour, inappropriate sexual behaviour etc.

- Learning to make mature relationships based on honesty and respect.
- Looking to God as their source of help and healing.
- Helping others who are hurting.

It is vital to note that healing can be complete and liberating. Strength and integrity and compassion can be the fruits of the healing process.

What do victims of sexual abuse need?

- To be believed and to be given the respect of a listening ear.
- The opportunity to rebuild trust in the loving care of others.
- The opportunity to begin the process of shedding shame and guilt.
- A safe place in which to vent the anger which has been suppressed.
- Knowledge that they are now safe. (It may be legally binding to report the abuse to the authorities.)
- Information about professional resources to assist them in recovery.
- Encouragement to persevere with recovering and healing when the going gets tough.

What are appropriate ecclesial responses to abuse?

- The ecclesia must affirm the dignity and worth of each human being, according to the teaching of Scripture. Matt 10:31; 1 John 3:1.
- The ecclesia must acknowledge that abusive behaviours are unacceptable in the church of God. Col. 3:5.
- The ecclesia must accept responsibility for the discipline of members who act in abusive ways. Perpetrators must be held accountable for their actions. Ecclesial leaders are now regarded as "mandatory reporters" of sexual abuse of a person under 16 years of age.
- Victims of abuse must be protected. Too often, in the past, victims have been re-victimised by censure and public exposure, or alternatively, the abuse has been minimised, and victims have been

asked to maintain the secret. The ecclesia needs to break the code of silence and secrecy, and embrace the opportunity to help put an end to abusive behaviour.

- The ecclesia should encourage victims and their families to avail themselves of professional services to help them to deal with the psychological repercussions of abuse experiences. The spiritual problems of abused persons also may need gentle handling by sensitive ecclesial members.

• Forgiving should not be expected prematurely. It is important to understand that forgiving an offender can be real and effective only when healing has taken place. The survivor of abuse needs to remain in control of his/her recovery and to be the one to decide when forgiving is appropriate.

Further reading:

Anderson, Bill: *When Child Abuse Comes to the Church*, Bethany House Publishers, 1992.

Evans, Patricia: *The Verbally Abusive Relationship*, Adams Media Corporation, 1996.

Heitritter, L. & Vought, J. *Helping Victims of Sexual Abuse*, Bethany House Publishers, 1989

Jantz, G. L. *Healing the Scars of Emotional Abuse*, Fleming H. Revell, 1995

Matthews, C. A.: *Breaking Through*, Albatross Books, 1990

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Revised July 2005.



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