



Growing in
understanding

The church as a safe place

Material developed by Sue Crittall and produced,
with assistance from Uniting Communications,
Queensland Synod 2015



The Uniting Church in Australia
QUEENSLAND SYNOD



Growing in understanding The church as a safe place

This resource discusses the importance of church congregations being safe places for all people. It talks about the grooming of children, adults and congregations.

Speaking about abuse and harm is difficult in most cultures including in the life of the church. This can be especially hard for people who have experienced abuse and harm, or whose family members or friends have experienced abuse and harm.

Please seek a safe person to talk through any issues this resource raises for you personally.

Material developed by Sue Crittall, Presbytery Ministers nominee to the Uniting Church in Australia Queensland Synod Royal Commission Task Group. Produced with the assistance of Uniting Communications 2015.

The Uniting Church is a Christian community. We believe that God reaches out to us in love and acceptance and that our relationships with each other should express love and respect. As a community of faith we are committed to providing a place in society where human beings can explore what it means to be made in the image of God. As an expression of this commitment, the Uniting Church in Australia recognises its responsibility to provide worshipping and pastoral communities that are free from abuse and that provide safe environments for all people to explore and express their faith in the Gospel. (The Uniting Church in Australia Safe Place Statement 1997, Commission on Women and Men)

The Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse is a grim reminder that churches have not always been safe places for children and young people. Sadly this includes local churches and agencies of the Uniting Church in Australia.

Christians are called by Christ to love one another—to acknowledge when we have failed, express our sorrow, seek forgiveness, and restore relationships.

Boundaries set limits

Being aware of boundaries is an important part of keeping people safe. Boundaries help us understand the nature of the relationships that we have with other people. They help set limits in relationships.¹ Boundaries can be about physical touch (who we let touch us), emotional closeness (who we want to share our thoughts and feelings with) and behaviour (what we will do and what we will not do). Boundaries help guide us as we act and relate towards others.

Boundaries change as we invite people into relationship. Boundary violation occurs when boundaries are not respected. Boundary violation results in harm. It is important to be aware of boundaries and how to act if boundaries are violated. As people committed to the church being a safe place we must name such violations, and ensure that they cease.

How could this happen in our church?

Members of congregations struggle to accept that someone they know could have caused abuse and harm to another person—let alone sexually abused a child. But abuse and harm does occur, and sometimes it takes place within a church community.

Church congregations are full of good-hearted people who believe in forgiveness and giving others the benefit of the doubt. It is because church communities are committed to love and forgiveness that they can be places where abuse and harm can both flourish and be hidden.

Church members share a deep connection. They greet each other and seek to get to know one another, turning to each other at times of grief and pain. They invite each other into their homes and let children run freely between them.

Ministers are given a special place. They help church members to understand the scriptures and they preside over the sacraments—they are given access and opportunity—and invited into lives at times of suffering and loss.



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Who would do such a thing?

When members of a congregation are confronted with the information that someone has been abused and harmed within their church community, the news can be greeted with disbelief and denial. “*I don’t believe it*”, “*I know this person, they would not do that*”, “*It is not true*”, “*This is a made-up story*”. People of goodwill find it incomprehensible that someone would want to cause another person harm and pain.

The sad truth is that there are some within and connected to the church community who have abused and harmed others—in the past and in the present. While there are some people who actively seek to abuse others, others wander down a path that leads to abuse and harm. A person who causes abuse and harm could be married or single, have children or not have children, be male or female, be a young person or an older person, a minister or a lay member. Adults and children can be victims of abuse and harm.

Responding to victims

Within church communities the victims of abuse and harm who reveal what has happened can be condemned as liars and rejected. Church congregations go through a process of grief when stories of abuse and harm are revealed. People experience disbelief, denial, anger, confusion and intense sorrow.

In some circumstances the victim who discloses the abuse and harm they have suffered finds it impossible to remain within the congregation and leaves.

Evidence to the Royal Commission has shown that it takes on average 20 years for a person who has experienced abuse and harm as a child to come forward². Adult survivors of child abuse and harm need acknowledgement, understanding, support and compassion.

Members of the Christian community need to recognise that there are people who have experienced abuse, suffering and pain within church communities.

Creating safe church communities

As shared guardians of the children in congregations, church members need to learn how to create church communities that are safe places. Keeping people safe is everyone’s responsibility.

The commitment of the Uniting Church in Australia to being a safe place has led to the development of programs and processes that focus on safety. Members of local congregations can find it difficult to understand why there have to be systems in place to care for children and young people. People can be heard to say: “*What is wrong with the way we did it in the past?*”, “*Why is this necessary?*”, “*This is church, we are a family*”, “*This wasn’t what we did when my children were here*”.

Programs have been developed because when implemented they reduce the risk of abuse and harm to children and other vulnerable people. These programs help individuals and congregations to grow their awareness of the vulnerability of children and the importance of being child safe. They enable congregations to identify behaviours that are acceptable and behaviours that are unacceptable. They teach congregations about boundary violations and how to respond to situations where people have been harmed or are at risk of being harmed.

What is grooming?

It is important to understand that people who abuse are skilled at manipulating relationships and behaviours. They identify vulnerable people and make them feel special, lowering defences and personal safeguards. This is called “grooming”. Grooming is conduct that creates and then exploits opportunities to engage in sexual activity.

Grooming behaviour typically involves a graduation or progression of behaviour from attention-giving to sexual contact. Grooming is a subtle process. Groomers target their victim, seek to establish a bond, and then gradually progress the relationship through a process of exploration. Adults and children can be groomed.

How children are groomed

Grooming a child might include isolating the child from others, playing games of touch and tickle, sitting a child on a lap, taking a child on special outings, giving a child gifts which could include alcohol, cigarettes and pornography. Grooming can occur in public view—showing a child that their parents and other adults approve of the groomer’s behaviour.³

Groomers of children can and will groom the parents or guardians of the child. Parents/guardians are conditioned by the groomer to consider behaviour that they might otherwise reject, to be normal. Parents/guardians of a child can be delighted that another adult is taking an interest in their child. Groomers establish an emotional connection with the child—seeking to lower the child’s guard. Groomers look to see whether a child can keep a secret—preparing the child to engage in sexual activity.

The groomer is seeking the compliance of the child. Children might be told “*This is something special between us*”, “*No-one will believe you*”, “*If you tell, this will hurt your family*” and “*If you tell, I will get into trouble*”. Groomers thrive on silence, secrecy and shame⁴.

How adults are groomed

Groomers of adults target vulnerable adults. They find ways of making the person feel special and appreciated. In congregations, information shared in pastoral conversations may be used to establish emotional connection. Groomers use personal warmth to connect with an adult—making a lonely person feel they have a companion, an emotionally vulnerable person feel listened to, and a person with low self-esteem feel needed.

2 Royal Commission Interim Report Vol 1 page 96

3 Smallbone 2014 extract from evidence provided to the Royal Commission into Institutional Abuse Responses to Child Sexual Abuse

4 refer Bravehearts website www.bravehearts.org.au

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Groomers seek to isolate the adult from others while creating a special relationship where the adult comes to rely on and need the groomer. Grooming of an adult could include being overly available, holding hands during prayers, massage, special hugs after prayer, giving special tasks, sharing personal information, brushing against the body. Sexual activity is sought.

If challenged, groomers make excuses or give justifications—*“I was just trying to comfort you, it was a holy kiss”*. The adult then doubts their reading of a situation and is embarrassed. Grooming silences the inner moral compass.⁵ Behaviour that might otherwise be stopped is allowed to continue. Adult victims of grooming can be trapped by feelings of guilt, fear and shame.

How congregations are groomed

It is not just individuals who can be groomed—congregations and communities also can be groomed. Congregations are communities of faithful, trusting believers whose members are bonded together by shared faith in God.

Forming a special bond is a critical step for groomers as they target vulnerable children and adults.

In an environment where bonding together is encouraged (e.g. through singing and community activities) and celebrated (through sacraments and rituals of church life), the conditions are ripe for grooming behaviour to be encouraged, condoned and even enabled. Congregations have a shared life built around faith in Jesus Christ. It is the very behaviours that grow the body of Christ (sharing, developing close relationships, making connections, making people feel loved and special) that groomers hijack and manipulate for their personal gratification.

In congregational life it can be usual to see people hold hands during times of prayer. Holding hands in prayer encourages connection and builds healthy relationships. Congregation members interpret intentions behind such behaviour in the best possible light, thinking that all motivations must be good. But a groomer can use the accepted behaviours (such as the practice of hand-holding in prayer) as a step in establishing a relationship with a potential victim.

Congregations are places where children are encouraged to develop relationships with other members. An adult’s interest in a child member of the congregation can be welcomed and facilitated by other members of the congregation including the parents of the child. Parents may be pleased that a member of the congregation is taking a special interest in their child.

Similarly, adult members of a congregation seek to fellowship together. The giving and receiving of warm encouragement including embraces is built into church life. Congregations welcome signs that a troubled adult is being comforted, that a lonely person is making connections.

In the environment that is church, people lower their defences towards others. As close and caring communities, we allow intense private moments to occur in public spaces. We affirm dedication to each other and the church, encouraging trust.

Acknowledging the vulnerability of the church and its members to manipulative and predatory behaviour is deeply painful. Yet this understanding is essential to building communities of faith which safeguard all those who seek Christian fellowship.

A shared responsibility

Church members have a shared responsibility to ensure that their congregation is a worshipping and pastoral community that is free from abuse and provides a safe environment for all people to explore and express their faith in the Gospel.

Presbyteries and Synods have resources available to help church congregations ensure they are safe places for all people.

Questions for reflection:

In what ways are churches vulnerable to those who wish to exploit and harm others?

What is meant by grooming?

Behaviour may or may not be grooming. How does the concept of boundaries help a congregation be a safe place for all people?

⁵ Refer Garland 2006 *When Wolves Wear Shepherd’s Clothing: helping women survive clergy sexual abuse* Social Work and Christianity spring 2006 vol 33, no 1

