



## Responding to Concerns

### Purpose

This document provides guidance to councils and committees of the church seeking to address:

- Observed or reported unsafe behaviours
- Observed or reported unsafe programs or activities
- Unsatisfactory performance on the part of leaders or volunteers

This procedure applies to matters involving the abilities and performance of volunteers, helpers and leaders of children's activities and programs.

This process does not precede or replace mandatory reporting of concerns about harm, or potential harm to children or young people. Mandatory reporting always takes precedence and no investigation into what happened should take place while authorities are involved following a report to them. Please see mandatory reporting documents for the correct process to use if there are concerns or harm, potential harm, or grooming of a child.

### Legislation

While legislation is different in each state and territory within the Northern Synod, the law within the Northern Territory requires leaders and volunteers within the church to report all instances of concern about potential harm or abuse to children. In South Australia, ministers of religion are mandatory informers. In all three jurisdictions including Western Australia anyone can report. The Northern Synod because of our commitment to being a safe church for all, requires ministers and leaders to report if you have a concern about potential harm or abuse to children.

### Principles

- The safety and well-being of each individual is important
- The safety and well-being of each child is always the priority
- All ministry agents, church members, volunteers and leaders are treated fairly and consistently
- Concerns and incidents are investigated thoroughly, in line with policies and processes
- Decision-making processes are transparent
- Mandatory reporting obligations together with NS expectations to report are met in line with the requirements for ministry agents and lay workers



## Responding to concerns and/or complaints

Concerns and complaints provide an opportunity to strengthen understanding and improve our services. When people's expectations are not met, they may complain to one another or directly to their ministry agent. Concerns and complaints may range from feedback about "how to do it better" to emotional demands for explanation and action.

A three step process to responding well provides guidance to help you remain respectful, maintain rapport and ensure appropriate action has been provided.

### 1. Acknowledge and apologise

- 1.1. **Thank** the person for taking the time to raise the issue that's concerning them
- 1.2. Offer an **apology**, before moving on to ask further questions (e.g. "I'm sorry xyz happened")

### 2. Ask and listen

- 2.1. Ask open **questions** to clarify that you understand what the person is telling you. To assist the communication, it may be helpful to acknowledge facts, thoughts, emotions and wants. If the concern is one of harm or abuse, real or potential, to a child then do not investigate: refer to the Mandatory Reporting Guide for Ministry Agents and Lay Workers.
- 2.2. Listen – don't interrupt, argue, justify or make promises. Pay attention to what the person is telling you and use **open** questions to clarify your understanding of what is being said.

### 3. Act

- 3.1. Explain **what** actions you will take next, being mindful of any mandatory reporting processes. Focus on what you can do, for example, "I will check on ..."; "I will speak to ..."; "I will take you to ..."; "I will arrange ..." (see actions to take section below).
- 3.2. Plan a time to report back to them and check whether this timing is acceptable for them. For example, "... and I'll get back to you about it on Wednesday, how does that sound?".
- 3.3. Follow up. Act quickly and keep the person informed about the actions that have taken place (see below for more **detail**).

## Actions to take: Unsafe behaviour

### 4. Assess the immediate risk

- 4.1. Are the concerns about repeated boundary violations, knowledge or reasonable suspicion of grooming behaviour, harm or abuse to children?
  - 4.1.1. If **Yes** use the appropriate Mandatory Reporting Guide for Ministry Agents or Lay Workers.
- 4.2. Are there any immediate safety concerns?
- 4.3. Does the person/s involved need to be stood aside from child related duties pending the outcome of due process?



5. Report the concerns and actions taken

- 5.1. Follow the mandatory Reporting Guide for Ministry Agents or Lay Workers. These guides also outline who else you should report to within the church.
  - 5.1.1. If you are not sure about what action to take or what information to include when reporting, contact the Safe Church Admin Coordinator at [safechurch@ns.uca.org.au](mailto:safechurch@ns.uca.org.au)
- 5.2. Record your concerns and actions taken using the Template for Complaints and Allegations.
- 5.3. Provide a copy of your report to the relevant authority if appropriate.
- 5.4. Provide a copy of your report to the presbytery chairperson and/or church council chairperson.
- 5.5. Provide a copy of your report to the Synod office at [safechurch@ns.uca.org.au](mailto:safechurch@ns.uca.org.au)
- 5.6. After reporting, care must be taken to always cooperate with authorities.

## Actions to take: Unsafe programs or activities

1. Assess the immediate risk

- 1.1. Are there any immediate safety concerns?
- 1.2. If you are not sure about what action to take or what information to include when reporting, contact the Safe Church Admin Coordinator at [safechurch@ns.uca.org.au](mailto:safechurch@ns.uca.org.au) or ph. 08 8982 3400.

2. Report the concerns and actions taken

- 2.1. Record your concerns and actions taken.
- 2.2. Provide a copy of your report to the presbytery chairperson and/or church council chairperson.
- 2.3. Provide a copy of your report to the Synod office *as above*.
- 2.4. Review the activity or program and complete a new Risk Assessment. Provide a copy of the new risk assessment to the church council chairperson and the presbytery chairperson.

## Documents

3. Storage of documents

- 3.1. All records must be kept in the relevant personnel file for the period of the position.
- 3.2. All records and reports concerning suspected or known grooming behaviour harm or abuse of children must be kept indefinitely.