



is it "abuse"?





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We hear stories about it in the news. It’s a hot topic in the media. It’s everywhere. It involves celebrities, athletes, students, politicians, or maybe the family sitting next to you at church. When is it an affair? When can it be defined as abuse? The answers may not always seem clear.

To understand abuse, we must understand the dynamic of power at its heart. In abuse, one person uses power to harm, manipulate, or control another person. In addition to more blatant sexual and physical abuse, emotionally abusive behaviors such as coercion, intimidation, threats, isolation, and blaming can be equally devastating. Those who are abused begin to feel increasingly powerless and consequently more dependent on the one causing the abuse. They begin to lose a sense of self as the abusive person gains an even greater sense of power. It can become a vicious cycle, a trap that holds captive those who become entangled. In this destructive context, mutual consent is impossible.

In contrast, we are called to be one body, the Body of Christ. Our Lord came in humility and love, sacrificing himself for the Church (His Bride). We are called to follow Him. This is the power of the cross, the power of the Kingdom of God. Power is used in humble, loving, self-sacrifice for the sake of others. It’s the opposite of the way power is used in abuse. Abuse destroys the Lord’s design for relationship in His Church.

Church leaders, those who act in the Lord’s name, in powerful and trustworthy positions, must be held to a high standard. Abusive behavior by church leaders reveals a misuse of the power and sacred trust that accompany their position. Patterns of abusive behavior may seem harmless at first but can escalate into more serious emotional, physical, or sexual abuse, causing great harm in the church. It is *always* the responsibility of church leaders to maintain healthy boundaries in all of their ministry relationships. The power and authority invested in the position must be taken into account. When sexual boundaries are crossed in a relationship with a church leader, it’s not an affair. It is abuse.

Safe Church Ministry equips congregations in abuse awareness, prevention, and response. For more information, contact:



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Safe Church Ministry, 1700 28th Street SE, Grand Rapids, MI 49508-1407
616-224-0735 | crcna.org/safechurch