

WATCHTOWER
BIBLE AND TRACT SOCIETY OF NEW YORK, INC.
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August 1, 1995

TO ALL BODIES OF ELDERS IN THE UNITED STATES

Dear Brothers:

We are pleased to outline below some guidelines that we hope will be helpful to you in protecting victims of child abuse and in dealing with a brother or sister in the congregation who has been guilty of sexually abusing a child.

When a member of the congregation is accused of child molestation, the elders should contact the Society's Legal Department immediately. Many states make it mandatory that elders report an accusation to the proper authorities but other states do not. In those states where such is required, oftentimes the parent, the guardian, or the accused person himself can do the reporting. In this way the confidentiality protected by ecclesiastical privilege is not violated. Still, whether or not the accusation is reported to the authorities, when it is established that a member of the congregation is guilty of child abuse, appropriate steps should be taken in keeping with initial direction from the Society's Legal Department.

Additionally, steps should be taken to protect the child, or other children, from further sexual abuse. Obviously, parents would be keenly interested in taking adequate precautions in this regard. Helpful information along these lines can be reviewed in the January 22, 1985, and October 8, 1993, issues of Awake! Loving elders, too, will want to act in a way that demonstrates their protective care, since the word "overseer" carries the thought of one who watches over, a guardian, a shepherd of the flock. (See "Pay Attention to Yourselves and to All the Flock," pages 90 and 93.) Thus, they would want to take steps to protect a child abuse victim when a judicial committee determines that the child molester is repentant and will remain a member of the Christian congregation. The same concern would be shown when a pedophile is disfellowshipped and later cleans up his life and is reinstated.

It would be appropriate to talk very frankly to a former child abuser, strongly cautioning him as to the dangers of hugging or holding children on his lap and that he should never be in the presence of a child without another adult being present. This may prevent putting that one in the way of temptation or unfounded accusation. At the same time, it is good to remember that the Bible, at Matthew 12:31 and I Corinthians 6:9-11, shows it is possible for a person to stop his or her wrongful course, repent, and thereafter live in harmony with God's righteous standards. This is true of all wrongdoers--even a former child abuser."

TO ALL BODIES OF ELDERS IN THE UNITED STATES August 1, 1995 Page 2

While it is unscriptural to say that a former child abuser could never enjoy exemplary privileges of service in the congregation, certainly the elders will want to be very cautious, especially when one had repeatedly engaged in this kind of wrongdoing or had been disfellowshipped for such an offense. Before extending privileges, therefore, it is necessary that one would meet the qualification of having a fine testimony from individuals inside and outside the congregation. This means that he must have lived down the reproach which resulted from his wrongdoing. Generally, it will take a considerable number of years to achieve such irreprehensibility depending on the notoriety involved. So it would be Up to the elders to determine whether such a one is extended privileges, taking into account all factors in each individual case. (1 Tim. 3:7) At any rate, this should never be done hastily. Considerable time should always pass before a former child abuser is used, if ever.

What if a former child abuser moves to another congregation? The Congregation's Publisher Record card(s) for that person should be sent to the new congregation, along with a letter of introduction. If he is under judicial restrictions, the committee in his former congregation should clearly and discreetly inform the elders in the new congregation about the problem, outlining the counsel given and the restrictions imposed and pointing out what they have been doing to monitor and assist him. Even if years have passed and the individual is no longer restricted but there is still some concern (as outlined in the preceding paragraph), the elders in the new congregation should be informed.

It is hoped that the above direction will help you brothers in handling matters in the congregation so as to protect victims and potential victims from child abuse, and at the same time, balance justice with mercy. With this letter we send our warm Christian love and greetings.

Your brothers,

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