



The Uniting Church in Australia
Synod of South Australia

Who Needs to Know?

A resource for Church Councils dealing with Persons of Concern

To be used collaboratively with the Placements and Safe Church Team
and other resources dealing with persons of concern.

WHO NEEDS TO KNOW?

In thinking through your response to a person of concern there are a number of factors to consider. Any decisions will be shaped by two key values- our commitment as a church to be a place of grace in which all people are treated with respect as created in the image of God and the call to be a safe place, people who care for and protect the vulnerable. Any decision about a continuing relationship as a congregation with a person of concern can only be made after a thoughtful and thorough conversation. There are no easy answers. People engaged in the conversation may come with their own stories of loss, abuse and betrayal while others may come with stories of grace, forgiveness and new beginnings. There will also be hidden stories, masked behind anger or a desire to forgive and forget. This is an area where few people have experience in making these kind of decisions. So be at peace if you are struggling.

The following sets out the key areas that have an impact on how you think through “Who Needs to Know?” The dot points are intended to invite you into a thoughtful, discerning conversation about your response in these difficult and trying circumstances.

Relationship

- A key factor will be your relationship to a person of concern. If your congregation has had a long term relationship with a person you may be more inclined to continue the relationship, especially if that has been a positive relationship and they have significant relationships in the congregation. The converse may be true if people feel betrayed in whatever way.
- The sense of betrayal will vary according to the nature of the offence. If the offence occurred to members of the congregation or their families then this will cause deep hurt which will be hard to overcome.
- If the congregation has supported a person who has maintained their innocence throughout legal proceedings but then confesses or is found guilty that can shatter trust.
- When a congregation has invested a good deal of care and time into a person only to discover a history of abusing others this too can leave a sense of betrayal.
- Every case is different. In some circumstances we are dealing with a concrete act where people have been violated within Congregations, at other times there will be a more generalised sense of loss and betrayal where the act has happened in another community or happened years earlier. The feelings evoked and the reactions that follow will vary.
- The number of people involved, the profile of the person in the congregation, the number of people who already know and the level of emotionality surrounding this person of concern will all influence who and how you inform.

Capacity

- A Church Council, or other appropriate body, will need to think about their capacity to care for the person of concern and the congregation.
- Key questions to consider will include:
- Have you the people and energy to undertake the oversight?
- This may include the monitoring of a person of concern on a church property and programmes over a sustained period of time.
After the initial burst of energy are you committed to years of oversight?

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- Size of a congregation will be factor here. There needs to be a commitment from a small group of people to give oversight, it might be easier to find such a group and renew them in larger congregation. Similarly it might be easier to have a programme which the person of concern relates to rather than the whole congregation. Furthermore a larger congregation might be able to absorb some of the tensions easier. Conversely it might be harder to hide in a smaller congregation and there is likely to be fewer possibilities for temptation.
- Theological Resources: Some congregations already have a theology in place that increases their capacity to care for persons of concern. A strong commitment to being a people of hospitality and grace alongside having a deep awareness for the need for protecting the vulnerable. As well, they will have the ability to undertake a vigorous practical theological conversation which deepens their wisdom. A congregation that is unused to a practical theological conversation in which an issue is explored using Scripture, tradition, experience and current community wisdom might find discussing how to respond to a person of concern a difficult topic on which to cut their teeth.

Context

Some of the issues around context may have already been canvassed in your earlier conversations but it is worth being explicit about them here:

- What are the demographics of your congregation? If there are children, youth or other vulnerable people involved ensuring their safety will be a paramount value. If many of your members are infirm that will limit your ability to monitor a person of concern. We have suggested at times that a person of concern change congregations to one whose demographics are more appropriate.
- We would also invite you to give consideration to your property, especially the kind of spaces that characterise your building. Our church properties vary widely. Some are quite complicated with many side rooms and inter-connecting corridors where it is hard to maintain a line of vision. Other buildings have more open spaces where one might monitor another's presence without being intrusive. Maybe a walk around your property thinking about being a safe place would be a helpful activity here.
- Similarly it is good to reflect on the programmes associated with your congregation. It might also be appropriate to think about the groups that hire your premises, especially if it is likely that the person of concern will be present at the same time.

Whatever the decision you make concerning a person of concern you need to think through "Who needs to know?"

If you decide that you do not have the capacity to continue or the hurt is too deep then you will need to think through who else among the congregational leaders in your community might need to be informed. This is a tricky area. Not informing other congregational leaders can lead to them feeling betrayed if the person reoffends in their congregation or they find out they have offended after they have welcomed them wholeheartedly into the life of the congregation. On the other hand if you are too liberal with the information they may be



legal consequences. Please seek advice from the Synod Placements and Safe Church Team before making this decision.

If you decide that to care for the person of concern as part of your congregation you will need to think through:

- Who already knows? Is this a case in which there is widespread knowledge or is it a secret known by a few?
- Who needs to know? The minister in all cases. The Church Council will normally be informed. Presbytery and Synod immediately. This group of people who need to know may change as a court case or other legal procedures progresses. A limited group at the outset that will need to be expanded especially after sentencing.
- Is there likely to be publicity about the case? If there is a possibility that congregational members are going to read about the case in the newspaper or see it reported on television then it is better to think about sharing information with the congregation prior to the publicity. Note it is particularly important that the Synod is informed if you are aware of potential media involvement or publicity as this allows the Moderator as spokesperson for the Uniting Church in SA to be briefed.
- Size of Congregation: In a large congregation key leaders and the people providing oversight may suffice. In a small congregation everyone might need to know.
- Who is at risk? Think about the programmes of your church, and maybe even your hall hirers, is anyone likely to be at risk from the person of concern? Is anyone likely to be rightly offended if they weren't informed?
- Who has a right to know? This is a tricky one but it is worth asking the question. They might be leaders, families, groups associated with the church who need to know.

Important note: if there is a suppression order from a judge in place this will have an influence on whom you inform and how you inform.

Positively it lessens the chances of people finding out via the media.

Again seek advice from Synod Placements and Safe Church Team.

