

Local organization creates resource guide for churches to help members who have experienced sexual abuse

- CAROLE DECK | For LNP and LancasterOnline
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Churches generally strive to be a place where its congregants can feel a sense of belonging in a safe environment. But some survivors of sexual abuse struggle to find healing in their places of worship.

"To create safe environments for adult survivors of sexual violence, congregations need to be much more proactive," says Linda Crockett, founder and director of Safe Communities, a local organization that works to support survivors.

Sexual abuse, she says, is not a subject pastors often preach about from the pulpit. She also says people are reluctant to openly discuss it in church, and most congregations aren't aware of how certain language, interactions and worship practices may traumatize survivors.

Safe Communities vision is to create an environment "where all children and teens are free from sexual abuse, and survivors are empowered to live healthy, joyful and vibrant lives." True to that mission statement, Safe Communities is offering a new resource to churches, *The Guide to Creating Safe Environments for Survivors of Sexual Abuses in the Congregation* to churches.

Written by Crockett and the Rev. Mark Harris, pastor of Salem United Church of Christ in Columbia, the 36-page guide was published in March by the Safe Church program at Safe Communities as part of a \$50,000 grant from the LMC Legacy Foundation. The foundation supports the guide and child abuse prevention workshops and programs for survivors, which combine behavioral health practices with faith.

The free guide is available for download from the Safe Communities website at safecommunitiespa.org. Its sections include: "The Impact of Child Sexual Abuse on Faith," "Guide to Conversations in the Congregation," "Elements of a Safe Environment for Survivors" and "Pastoral Care for Survivors." It also recommends further resources like books, websites, workshops and retreats.

All of the workshops and retreats offered in the guide are being sponsored by LMC Legacy Foundation at no cost to participants until Oct. 31.

"When we review the statistics that one in four women and one in six men have experienced some level of sexual abuse as children, it's the rare pastor who's not already preaching to survivors, whether they are aware of it or not," says Harris, who graduated from Lancaster Theological Seminary.

While most pastors aren't trained as counselors, he believes they do have an important role as a faithful friend, a partner to get needed resources and to be a constant cheerleader for those struggling towards recovery. He encourages fellow pastors to use the term pastoral care. This would be especially important for congregants who go to a pastor for help rather than a therapist. In the guide, he references Biblical scripture as models for pastors to join a survivor on their journey to find answers and resources.

The Rev. Pam Reist, pastor of Elizabethtown Church of the Brethren, calls the guide a beautiful gift to congregations for both survivors, pastors and members.

"It's educational, informative, loaded with resources and offers options for pastors to respond to survivors in healthy, helpful ways," Reist says.

Both Crockett and Harris bring their own experience as survivors of sexual child abuse to help others find their voices and heal. Crockett was sexually and physically abused from 3 to 12 years of age by a relative and family friend making her vulnerable as a teenager.

"My childhood pastor's inability to believe that members could also sexually abuse children, and the congregations' reluctance to engage in survivor ministries is echoed today," Crockett says.

She started the Safe Church program in 2011 while working at the Samaritan Counseling Center. More than 70 area churches went through the program to create child protection policies and educate volunteers, staff and members about prevention of child sexual abuse.

Of course, churches unfortunately aren't immune to the issue of sexual abuse. Pennsylvania unveiled findings from a massive investigation in 2018 that found more

than 300 Catholic priests across six dioceses – including the Diocese of Harrisburg – sexually abused children over seven decades.

Currently, churches of all denominations have a minimum legal requirement to conduct background checks on clergy. They're also mandated to report sexual abuse. While Crockett says that's a start, she says more can be done to make a church truly safe for children and survivors.

Safe Communities transitioned the Safe Church and Safe Places programs to Safe Communities on Jan. 1, 2020 having moved its offices to East Liberty Street in April 2019.

The organization receives no funding from outside sources. It's fiscally sponsored by [Humanitarian Social Innovations](#), serving as a bridge for startup nonprofits, providing accounting and operational support, as well as 501(c)(3) status. Currently, Safe Communities is hosting its Perennial Donors Campaign with a goal to raise \$833 by May 31. Each time a donor makes a monthly gift, large or small, a new flower blooms in the virtual online garden. The organization has received grants from several local foundations and businesses.

Harris admits his call to the ministry resulted from his own experiences of sexual abuse from age 11 to 15 by a family friend and his recovery as a survivor. It also gave him the motivation to co-write the guide with Crockett.

"Spurred by my seminary studies and encouraged by Linda and Safe Communities, I've begun the slow process of working with interested others to create a church setting built around inclusion, safety and responsiveness to survivors of sexual abuse," Harris says. Due to the pandemic, it's been on hold, but will move forward in the future.

The guide took six months to complete.

"The pandemic kept us from engaging in person with congregations so we expanded the guide which was a real blessing as it now is a comprehensive booklet that can be downloaded locally and in other states," said Crockett.

Hundreds of churches in the Safe Communities data base were notified about the guide being available to download. Print copies are available by request.

The Rev. Steven Fisher, pastor of Branch Community in Gordonville, is grateful for the guide and calls it an amazing resource.

"The ministry of Safe Communities and the work being done is truly a blessing and it is causing us to really engage this issue and motivating us to develop a comprehensive approach to prevention and care," Fisher says.

For more information about Safe Communities, to download the guide or make a donation, visit safecommunitiespa.org