



## BREAKING THE SILENCE & COVID-19 CONSIDERATIONS FOR MINISTERS AND ELDERS

### INTRODUCTION

The impact of COVID-19 and the government's safety measures on church life is significant and multifaceted. Since mid-March, churches have needed to cease physically meeting together and find new ways to worship, grow and fellowship together whilst following the advice to remain at home. Ministers have started delivering sermons through video and audio recordings and ministry groups have started to make use of video conferencing technology to enable bible study and youth group gatherings to continue. As congregations adjust to church in these new formats, it is wise that ministers and elders take the time to work out how they will maintain oversight of church activities in this time, and how they will implement safe ministry measures to protect the vulnerable in their midst from the risks arising from social isolation.

The CPU has put together this info pack to guide and advise Sessions in this process. The information will be divided into the following sections:

1. Maintaining oversight during isolation ..... p. 1
2. Staying vigilant towards grooming behaviour and abuse ..... p. 4
3. Summary checklist ..... p. 6

If you have any questions arising from the advice provided, please feel free to contact Jon Flood on 02 9690 9325 or at [jflood@pcnsw.org.au](mailto:jflood@pcnsw.org.au). The CPU is here to help.

### MAINTAINING OVERSIGHT DURING ISOLATION

One of the most important ways to stay on top of changing ministry activities is to have a consistent and clear approach to discussing and documenting them at regular Session meetings. Ministers and elders should become familiar with the **PATH** principles as a way to identify and assess the safe ministry factors of any ministry activity.

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| <b>Preparation</b>    | Have we <u>prepared</u> for this ministry activity? (risk management, consent forms, screening and training for all leaders etc.)  |
| <b>Accountability</b> | How are we staying <u>accountable</u> in this activity? (never alone with minors, recording incidents, agreeing to code of conduct/boundaries, publishing BTS policy on church website etc.) |
| <b>Transparency</b>   | How are we maintaining <u>transparency</u> in our ministry? (online interactions with minors open to observation by other leaders, clear communication to parents etc.)                      |
| <b>Humility</b>       | How are we <u>practicing</u> humility in our role? (Acknowledging our limits, getting support from church and CPU, being godly in the way we serve etc.)                                     |

*The coordinators of each ministry activity should be able to show how they are taking the PATH principles into consideration in their ministry's arrangements.*



## Session Meetings

Ministers and elders will continue to hold Session meetings in technology-facilitated communications. If not yet done, it is wise for Session to take the time to review their ministry activities in reference to BTS and to record this information for future reference. It should be noted what activities have transitioned to an online format, what activities have had to stop, and what activities have started up as a result of the current circumstances.

One way to review ministry activities thoroughly is by using the questions below for each activity:

### **Define –**

- What is the ministry activity?
- What format does it take?
- What is its purpose?
- Who is it reaching?
- Who is the coordinator?
- Who is leading the activity?

### **Discuss –**

- Are all the leaders BTS & WWCC compliant?
- Have each of the leaders been appointed by Session?
- What are the risks of the activity?
- Has PATH been applied?
- What preventative measures/boundaries are in place?

### **Delegate –**

- Who will be responsible for regularly checking in with the coordinator?
- Who should the coordinator contact about any changes to the activity?

### **Document –**

- Make sure all of the above is documented in written form and easily found for future reference.
- Remind those delegated to document any changes they are told about to be discussed at the next session meeting.

*For subsequent Session meetings, make a point on the agenda to discuss any current or arising BTS issues or concerns, and to acknowledge and address any incidents reported to Session. This includes recording any boundary breaches that leaders have told Session about, even if they were accidental.*



## Representatives of the Church

When the church appoints a person into a position of leadership, they are saying, “We trust this person to represent God’s church in this way.” This privilege is not something to be taken lightly. They have a responsibility to protect others from any abuse, and to notify the CPU should they have any concerns about those under their care. This includes ministers, elders, bible study leaders, those in children’s ministry, pastoral carers, and ministry trainees.

Additionally, Session is responsible for doing all they can to ensure that the individuals they appoint to these leadership roles are suitable representatives of the church. This means that all appointed people need to be fully compliant with their BTS training and WWCC (or equivalent) clearance, as indicated on the most recent church compliance list sent by the CPU.<sup>1</sup>

Pastoral care has a heightened emphasis in this time of isolation. Without the group setting of church gatherings, this sort of ministry presents increased risk of abuse. Therefore, Sessions are encouraged to consider having a formalised pastoral care effort during this time. If it is decided that certain people will be actively providing pastoral care on behalf of the church, acting under the authority of Session, then these individuals should be formally appointed as trusted representatives and provided with clear guidance on wise practices for technology-facilitated ministry<sup>2</sup>. Pastoral carers carry a level of perceived authority, and the Session has oversight of their actions in their role. This is distinct from the care and support that congregation members might give to others in the church as part of informal arrangements.

*Session needs to decide who is providing care on behalf of the church and intentionally communicate that list of people to the congregation. This will prevent anyone being able to falsely claim that they are acting under the authority of the church and exploiting the vulnerable.*

## Looking out for the vulnerable

As a Session, identify who in your church community is most vulnerable to abuse or harm during this time. This may include:

- children and young people
- people with disabilities
- older people
- people living alone
- people in an abusive relationship<sup>3</sup>
- people with mental health issues
- people who have lost their job
- people suffering from substance addiction

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<sup>1</sup> For an updated compliance list, ministers and BTS reps can contact Courtney Chan at [cchan@pcnsw.org.au](mailto:cchan@pcnsw.org.au).

<sup>2</sup> Consider providing pastoral carers with the BTS info sheet [BTS & COVID-19 – Accountable Pastoral Care](#).

<sup>3</sup> It is very important that any known or suspected cases of domestic and family violence are handled with care. Refer to the info sheet [Increased Risk of DFV in these uncertain times](#) and contact the CPU if you have any concerns.



Ministers and elders should discuss ways that they can provide support for these individuals and ensure that no one is taking advantage of the vulnerable in their current situation. Some ways to do this might include:

- Appointing pastoral carers (WWCC/BTS compliant) to support and regularly check in with vulnerable individuals in your congregation.
- Making sure your church directory or contact list is up to date and that contact details of anyone missing are obtained from them. Think of people on the fringes or anyone who was new to the church this year.
- Making sure all congregation members are informed about changes to activities, which may involve communicating through a range of platforms (e.g. calling the people who won't see a Facebook post).
- Ensuring that any continuing ministry to children and young people follows safe ministry guidelines.<sup>4</sup>
- Appropriately referring individuals to access counselling services.<sup>5</sup>
- Asking people "Are you keeping in contact with anyone from church?"
- Educating those in a position of authority within the church (elders, pastoral carers, bible study leaders etc.) about appropriate boundaries, the dangers of crossing those boundaries and the need for the principles affirmed by Breaking the Silence.

## STAYING VIGILANT TOWARDS GROOMING BEHAVIOUR AND ABUSE

It is important that all those in leadership remain vigilant to signs of coercion and abuse in the alternate arrangements for church activities. Isolation increases the risk of abuse occurring within homes and the growing use of online communications increases the risk of grooming behaviour occurring as a precursor to abuse.

Ministry has certain characteristics that can blur the line between professional and personal relationships, thereby creating potential for boundary violations. The switch to online communications now brings an additional set of factors that increase the risk, including:

- decreased accountability
- little or no visibility to others during interaction
- (virtual) access into a person's home
- increased vulnerability due to social isolation

For these reasons, it is important that church leaders are aware of what manipulative behaviour looks like, and also implement preventative measures that create an environment where it is difficult for offenders to hide.

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<sup>4</sup> For more information on safe online youth ministry, see [BTS & COVID-19: Connecting & Communicating Online](#) and [Online Meetings with Young People](#).

<sup>5</sup> The [Presbyterian Counselling Service](#) is available to connect people in our congregations with Christian counselling which can be delivered over the phone or online.



## Identifying Grooming Behaviour

Coercion or grooming behaviour refers to physical or psychological actions intrinsic to initiating or hiding abusive behaviour, which involves the manipulative cultivation of relationships with vulnerable adults, children and/or young people, their carers and others in authority. Grooming behaviour or coercion is a pattern of behaviour aimed at engaging a person as a precursor to abuse.

The behaviour can include persuading the person that a 'special' relationship exists through spending inappropriate special time with them, inappropriately giving gifts, showing special favours to them but not others, allowing them to overstep rules etc. It can also include the testing of boundaries, such as undressing in front of them, talking about sex etc. These behaviours may not indicate a risk if occurring in isolation but if there is a pattern of behaviour occurring it may indicate grooming or coercion.

Manipulative behaviours and abuse can occur between adults, however in these instances, there is often confusion about what constitutes abuse, confusion on the part of the victim as to their role in the incident and an expectation by the broader community that the victim prove his or her vulnerability. Clear policy, procedure and code of conduct can help address these situations. Individuals should also be educated about boundaries and learn how to recognise potential manipulation.

Grooming behaviour towards children and young people can include:

- identifying children or young people who are emotionally needy
- establishing a relationship with the child or young person's family to gain trust
- initiating contact in settings where no other adult is present or arranging situations where this is the case
- setting a child or young person apart from peers and/or siblings as 'special'
- establishing a 'peer' or 'buddy' relationship with a child or young person

In the current context, this would likely occur using technology-facilitated communication (text or direct messaging). Leaders must avoid contacting children and young people in private communication, and can only have interaction with them with the permission of parents/carers and with another leader present. This is based in the principles found in the Code of Conduct that they abide by in their position in the Presbyterian church. Other adults within church communities may not hold a position that requires them to follow the code of conduct, so parents should be educated to know what grooming looks like, and set an expectation for children that no adult should be contacting them without parental knowledge. The [eSafety Commissioner website](#) contains some helpful resources about online safety that you can provide to families.

## Upholding Boundaries

A person in a position of authority within the church must always be concerned about the integrity of his/her position, likely perceptions of the church and the wider community, and the need to acknowledge the real or perceived power given to them as a result of holding that position. Leaders must actively maintain appropriate boundaries, rather than passively assuming that they are there. Good intentions are not enough. Individuals in appointed roles must strive to ensure that appropriate boundaries are maintained at all times, and make sure they are held accountable. It may help to formalise and document expected boundaries for activities with specific needs.



## Clear Communication

Clear communication helps prevent abuse because everyone involved is clear on how the ministry operates. In children's ministry keeping parents informed and providing leaders with information is an important part of making ministry safe. Indeed, it is better to "over-communicate" than assume other people know what you know. Don't assume everyone knows how the ministry operates – take the time to communicate this to people you minister to, and in the case of children under 18, their families. This is also true of pastoral care – providing your congregation with a list of appointed pastoral carers means that they are able to hold certain expectations about the kind of contact they might receive.

It is important that people within the church know they can speak up with any concerns they have about abuse. Choosing a leader within the church people can speak to about concerns is a helpful approach. Also communicating that anyone can call the CPU with concerns is important.

Making sure that a link to the BTS website is prominently displayed on your church website or social media page is also a good way to empower your church community.

- Breaking the Silence website - [www.breakingthesilence.org.au](http://www.breakingthesilence.org.au)
- The Policy - [www.breakingthesilence.org.au/our-policy](http://www.breakingthesilence.org.au/our-policy)
- The Code of Conduct - [www.breakingthesilence.org.au/our-code-of-conduct](http://www.breakingthesilence.org.au/our-code-of-conduct)

*Advise all church members that if they receive any contact that makes them feel uncomfortable, they can and should let the church leaders know. Appoint and identify specific leaders for contact, in addition to the minister(s), and provide your congregation with their contact details and information on how to contact the CPU.*

## SUMMARY CHECKLIST

Check that Session has:

- Held a Session Meeting to discuss and document all church activities and their current arrangements
- Formally appointed the individuals responsible for pastoral care
- Checked that all individuals in ministry positions are included on the latest BTS/WWCC compliance list
- Confirmed with various ministry coordinators what safe ministry measures are in place in each ministry activity and record this information for review in future Session meetings
- Updated the congregational contact list
- Communicated to the congregation:
  - the appointed pastoral carer/s
  - the person to contact if there is any issue with contact received
  - the contact details for the CPU
- Included BTS information and links on the church website