



BREAKING THE SILENCE & COVID-19 ACCOUNTABLE PASTORAL CARE

Providing pastoral care to a church congregation is a valuable and rewarding ministry. In the present context of isolation, there is even more need for good pastoral care being provided for those feeling the effects of the coronavirus pandemic on everyday life. Without regular opportunities to meet at church activities, pastoral carers will be looking to seek out contact with those they serve and will need to implement additional safe ministry practices to safeguard their conduct in these new arrangements.

Pastoral carers should become familiar with the PATH principles as a way to identify and assess the safe ministry factors of any ministry activity.

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

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. If someone has a church leadership role, including pastoral care roles, they are legally considered to be in a position of authority within the church. 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. The church eldership is responsible for supervising and supporting those providing pastoral care and should also be informed if issues arise.

Pastoral care has a heightened emphasis in this time of isolation. The increased contact that pastoral carers will be making with congregation members, mostly unobservable to church leadership, presents increased risk of abuse. It is important that people know who has been appointed to provide pastoral care on behalf of the church, acting under the authority of Session. 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.

WISE BOUNDARIES & PREVENTATIVE MEASURES

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. Whenever someone is vulnerable, those in a position of authority within the church must actively maintain appropriate boundaries, rather than passively assuming that they are there. Good intentions are not enough. Those providing pastoral support must strive to ensure that appropriate boundaries are always maintained.



These boundaries should:

- create an environment where abuse is difficult to hide and where those in our care are protected,
- protect persons in authority from false, misconceived, malicious or vexatious accusation, and
- ensure as far as possible that proper procedures for dealing with allegations are adhered to at all times.

Clear communication helps prevent abuse because everyone involved is clear on how the ministry operates. When working with children, 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.

PASTORAL CARE DURING COVID-19

In the current circumstances, it is wise for a few extra safe ministry measures to be implemented.

General pastoral care:

- If you are caring for specific individuals in the church, you should inform Session of these people and the kind of support you are giving them.
- If pastorally caring for someone of the opposite gender, it is wise to include a spouse or another trusted friend in the conversation. If you are unable to have someone else with you then inform your ministry coordinator that you will be contacting the person and tell them which day and time you plan to phone, video call or visit them.
- If video calling, make sure to be dressed appropriately and avoid being in a closed-off area (eg. a private bedroom).

Caring for young people:

- Always gain parental/carer consent before contacting a child or young person in your church.
- Never be alone with a child in the course of your ministry role – there should always be other adults around. For virtual contact, this remains the same. Always have conversations in a way in which a parent/carer or other leader/s are able to observe the interaction.
- If your church Session is willing to allow “one-to-one” bible study and/or mentoring ministry by adults with children under 18, this must be approved by Session and the boundaries of this ministry must be clearly documented and approved by Session. A permission form must also be signed by parents/carers before this ministry commences.
- Communicate clearly with parents/carers when you are planning to contact their child by phone or video call. Contact should never be made after 10pm or within normal school hours during the school term.



Caring for vulnerable people:

- If you are visiting a vulnerable person (eg. to assist with grocery shopping), ask them to let their family know that you are in contact with them and make sure that they are comfortable with you doing so.
- If needed, provide information to older people about online safety. There are a [range of resources](#) produced by the eSafety Commissioner.¹
- If you are supporting someone who you know or suspect is experiencing domestic abuse, be extremely careful in how you contact them – it is common for communications to be monitored by an abusive partner or relative. Refer to the info sheet [Increased Risk of DFV in these uncertain times](#), and contact the CPU if you have any concerns.

Pastoral visitations:

- Take note on the government guidance on visiting other people at home (see <https://www.nsw.gov.au/covid-19/what-you-can-and-cant-do-under-rules>). In particular, ensure you are practising social distancing and good personal hygiene.
- Take care when visiting people over 70 years old, people that are over 65 with chronic medical conditions, people with compromised immune systems, and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island people that are over 50 with chronic medical conditions. If in doubt, it is better to continue to use phone or electronic communication to care for that person.
- Don't visit people if you are unwell or exhibiting potential symptoms of COVID-19, eg. fever, tiredness, dry cough. Again, if in doubt put off visiting until a time when it is safer.
- There is an increased risk of domestic and family violence so be aware of these risk factors as you visit people in their homes. Refer to the info sheet [Increased Risk of DFV in these uncertain times](#), and contact the CPU if you have any concerns.

¹ <https://www.esafety.gov.au/seniors/staying-safer-online>