

# What You Need To Know — Church Council Member

**If an *adult* comes to you with an accusation of abuse against the pastor, paid ministry staff, an elder or deacon, or against any leader in the church, paid or volunteer.**

*(If the alleged victim is under 18, the proper authorities, CAS or the police, must be notified.)*

1. Do **not** try to get the details, beyond the accusation itself. It should be noted that the accused must be presently a member of your church. The person making the allegation does not have to be a member of your church.
2. Do **not** alert the accused person that an accusation has been made.
3. Share the accusation with the Council's Executive, but if the accused is on the Executive, **not** with him/her. Do **not** share the accusation with anyone else.
4. The Executive\* must decide whether or not to call in the Classical Safe Church Team. If the decision is to do so, someone from the Executive will contact the Chairperson of the team to begin the Advisory Panel process. The Advisory Panel process is a fact-finding process. The Safe Church Team should be contacted **as soon as possible** after the allegation is presented to the Executive so that the Advisory Panel can be convened as soon as possible. Unnecessary delays can prove to be very devastating. If the classis does not have a Safe Church Team, the Executive should then request the nearest Classical Safe Church Team to conduct a Panel hearing.

\* In some churches, it may be the Consistory that decides on these matters. In other churches it may be the Council.

5. If the Executive decides not to call in the Classical Safe Church Team, the alleged victim can contact a member of the Classical Safe Church Team with the charges in writing and to request a fact-finding panel.
6. The Advisory Panel process will begin with a hearing for the alleged victim. The Executive has the option of having **two** representatives at the Panel hearing, under a strict pledge of confidentiality.
7. From the hearing with the alleged victim, the Panel determines probability and gravity. If neither serious nor probable, the Panel will write a summary and

submit it to the Executive and the process ceases. The accuser will be given a copy of this report.

8. If the allegation has probability and gravity, the accused person is notified that an accusation has been brought against him/her and that an Advisory Panel meeting with the alleged victim has taken place. He/she is then invited to present his/her defense before the same Panel at a time and location determined by the Panel. The meeting should take place within **seven** days after the alleged victim has met with the Panel.
9. The accused may discuss the allegations with others. What the Executive does **must** remain in strict confidentiality.
10. After hearing the response of the accused person, on behalf of the Panel, the Chairperson will attend an Executive meeting and bring the Panel's written report of its findings. The Executive and the Chairperson will present the results to the Consistory or Council. The Safe Church Team's role is **not** to determine guilt or innocence but to conduct fact-finding around the allegations and if appropriate to make recommendations, offer available resources, support networks, etc. A copy of the Panel's report is also given to both the accuser and accused.
11. The Consistory\*\* **must** then meet to decide upon the appropriate course of action. Consistory has 30 days from the receipt of the Panel's report to adjudicate the matter and take the next steps. The accused person **may not** be part of these deliberations. If the findings include confession of wrongdoing, the response of Council will include disciplinary action. Any disciplinary action would follow the articles of Church Order.

\*\* In some churches, it may be the Council that makes the final decision on any disciplinary situation.

12. The Chairperson of the Panel can appeal to the Classical Interim Committee (CIC) the Consistory's handling of the Panel's report. There are two scenarios when an appeal may take place:
  - i. If the Consistory decides not to adjudicate the matter nor take any further steps, then the Chairperson of the Panel, in consultation with you or your advocate, will submit a copy of the report to the CIC with a request for further action.
  - ii. If the Consistory takes an action that is contrary to the Panel's findings, then the Chairperson, in consultation with you or your advocate, will

submit a copy of the report to the CIC with a request for further action. Further action by the CIC could include the following:

1. The CIC meets with the Executive, the Chairperson of the Panel, and the advocate to review the findings and discuss possible steps to take with respect to the report.
2. The CIC meets with the Consistory to review the findings and discuss possible steps to take with respect to the report.
3. The CIC reports on the matter at the next Classis meeting.

13. If the accusation is denied by the Advisory Panel, the Council must decide whether to pursue the matter, based on what the Panel has presented to it. If Council pursues the matter under these circumstances, it could hold its own hearing, and the evidence, testimony, and witnesses brought forward in the Panel process could appear before Council, along with the full response of the accused. This seems like doing everything twice. However, keep in mind that most accused persons who have committed abuse do confess to a greater or lesser extent during the Panel process. It would be a rare case in which this dual hearing process is needed.