



# WATCHTOWER

BIBLE AND TRACT SOCIETY OF AUSTRALIA

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## TO ALL BODIES OF ELDERS

Dear Brothers:

After the recent Kingdom Ministry School, the Society received many expressions of appreciation from you brothers for the fine instruction presented. Indeed, not only did the school remind us of the privilege we have as elders but it provided us with practical direction on how to care properly for our many responsibilities.

As elders, you certainly have much to do—keeping your families spiritually strong, studying and preparing for meetings, caring for judicial matters, working at assemblies and conventions. Some of you willingly expend yourselves in building and maintaining Kingdom Halls and even in doing construction work at Bethel or on branch projects. And all of this is in addition to your taking the lead in the field ministry.

Your work in shepherding God's people is also very much needed and deeply appreciated. (1 Pet. 5:1-3) We often receive reports of your hard work in giving spiritual encouragement and personal attention to the needs of individual members of the congregation, some of whom are experiencing very serious problems. This is true of many who have been victims of child abuse. They also need our loving understanding and help. Many of these, even after learning the truth, continue to suffer emotional scars and must cope with unhappy memories. The Kingdom Ministry School drew attention to some of the things that the Bible and the Society's publications show that you, as spiritual shepherds, can do to help such victims. We

would like to review some of these points and others with you. We also hope to answer various questions that you have asked about meeting the needs of such victims of child abuse, particularly those sexually abused.

### HELPING VICTIMS OF CHILD ABUSE

Many children who have been continually violated by adults grow up with severe emotional scars and certainly need much loving attention. Thus, you will want to be conscious of treating such victims of abuse with much thoughtfulness and kindness. (See *"Pay Attention to Yourself and to All the Flock,"* page 17.) Such an attitude helps to assure the victim that you really care for him and that you are "like a hiding place from the wind and a place of concealment from the rainstorm." (Isa. 32:2) Like Jesus, we should be "tenderly compassionate."—Eph. 4:32.

One way you can show sincere interest is by being a good listener. James counselled: "Every man must be swift about hearing, slow about speaking." (Jas. 1:19) Further, Proverbs 21:13 says: "As for anyone stopping up his ear from the complaining cry of the lowly one, he himself also will call and not be answered." So as patient spiritual counsellors, listen carefully when a victim's problem is being discussed. The October 1, 1983, issue of *The Watchtower*, on page 28, cautions against telling a sufferer who seeks assistance "just to forget" what occurred. Many have found great relief simply in talking with a sympathetic, non-judgmental elder who can provide "the good word" of encouragement. (Prov. 12:25) Though you may need to ask tactful

questions to help the victim express matters, avoid probing unnecessarily or repeatedly into the details of the abuse, which can have a discouraging effect.

Many victims of abuse have learned to handle their emotional scars quite well, which is commendable. If the victim is leading a calm and peaceful life, then there is no need to dredge up memories that have been handled and put in the past. Others can be helped to put this problem to rest. On the other hand, there are still others, as described at Psalm 55:17, who 'cannot but show concern and moan' over their turmoil. In such cases, it may be very difficult for them to heal completely. Still, we want to help such ones feel that there is hope. By reasoning on the Scriptures and strengthening the victim with words of consolation and encouragement, elders may be able to help such troubled ones put the bad experiences behind them.—Job 16:5; 1 Pet. 5:12.

#### **BALANCING YOUR RESPONSIBILITIES**

It must be recognized that the time you can spend in helping an abuse victim is limited. Therefore, this shepherding responsibility must be balanced with your other responsibilities, which include caring for the spiritual, emotional, and material needs of your own family and assisting those in the congregation who have other problems. In some cases an incest survivor wants more attention than you can give. So some elders have found it beneficial to put boundaries, or some limits, on the time they spend. Depending on the individual's need, it may take several visits to get the desired relief for the victim, if this is possible. If the individual approaches you looking for help at times when you cannot discuss the problem extensively, perhaps giving some brief words of encouragement assuring that one of Jehovah's love, reading an appropriate scripture, or offering a short prayer, will affirm to the sufferer your interest and willingness to help to the extent possible.

Sometimes abuse victims approach capable older sisters for help. It is understood that a sister should not be in the awkward

position of trying to help in a situation that would appropriately be cared for by an elder, but the sister can give victims emotional support and encouragement as her circumstances and time allow. (See the March 15, 1990, issue of *The Watchtower*, page 28.) If the sister is approached by a child-abuse victim and endeavours to help her, she should periodically let the elders know what is being accomplished. If an abuse victim accuses a member of the Christian congregation of having molested her, then it would not be appropriate for a sister to become involved in this aspect of the matter. It is best for the victim to be assisted by the elders.

Just as good judgment is needed in selecting brothers to serve on a judicial committee, depending on what is involved, so, too, it would be wise to select among yourselves those best fitted to assist certain abuse victims. Since elders have varied abilities, some may be more effective than others in handling these cases.—Compare 1 Corinthians 12:4.

#### **WHAT ABOUT PROFESSIONAL THERAPY?**

There are times when an emotionally distressed Christian may seek professional help. Whether or not a brother or a sister pursues treatment from psychiatrists, psychologists, or therapists is a personal decision as long as the therapy does not conflict with Bible principles. (See *The Watchtower* of April 15, 1975, pages 255-6.) Potential problems may be avoided if a patient, or a companion, explains to the therapist the importance of the sufferer's religious beliefs.

Some medical professionals and therapists offer group therapy to those suffering from the effects of child abuse. While participating in group therapy by a professional therapist is a personal decision, there could be problems of revealing confidential facts about other members of the Christian congregation during such therapy if a Christian does not exercise discretion. (See July 8, 1982, issue of *Awake!*, page 8.) Thus, elders can give cautions to their brothers and sisters, such as those outlined

in the October 15, 1988, issue of *The Watchtower*, page 29, under the subheading "Talk Therapies." They can be helped to see that talking indiscriminately to others about child abuse may result in circulating damaging and harmful talk.—Prov. 17:9.

It must be recognized that elders as such are not mental-health professionals or therapists but are spiritual shepherds. (1 Pet. 5:2) Consequently, they should not conduct sessions where victims have come together for what some may view as group therapy. Nor should elders spend time reading secular publications dealing with worldly psychology or psychiatry. They should not take on a role similar to that of a professional therapist. Someone who has a serious mental or emotional illness may need professional help.

If a current case of child abuse comes to light in your congregation, elders should do what they can to protect children from further abuse. (See "*Pay Attention to Yourself and to All the Flock*," page 93.) How might this be accomplished? In the Addendum presented at the Kingdom Ministry School, direction was given that when elders receive reports of physical or sexual abuse of a child, they should contact the Society immediately for advice. Thereafter, if it is established that a member of the congregation is guilty of sexually abusing a child, a judicial committee would meet with this one, following theocratic procedures, unless otherwise directed by the Society. If the person is not repentant over the gross sin, disfellowshipping ac-

tion would be warranted. Additionally, elders can encourage parents to review the January 22, 1985, issue of *Awake!*, which provides suggestions on what they can do to protect their children from sexual abuse by anyone, inside or outside the family.—See also *Awake!* issues of June 22, 1982, and December 22, 1986.

Hopefully, the above direction will assist you brothers lovingly to help victims of abuse, as well as others in the congregation who face different problems. May Jehovah's rich blessing continue to be with you in carrying out your many responsibilities as shepherds of the flock. With this letter we send our warm Christian love and best wishes.

Your brothers,

*Watchtower B. & J. Society*  
OF AUSTRALIA

P.S. The presiding overseer should arrange to read this letter to the body of elders. Thereafter, the secretary should place it in the congregation file. In the future if elders are called upon to assist a victim of child abuse, this letter should be reviewed by them. It would be beneficial for the elders to spend some time discussing points made in the *Watchtower* and *Awake!* articles referred to in this letter.

A copy of the information "What Elders Can Say to Abuse Victims," which appears on the following page, may be made for each elder.