

GUIDELINES FOR BRANCH OFFICE SERVICE DESKS

1. The January 1, 1997, *Watchtower* article “Let Us Abhor What Is Wicked” explains the congregational viewpoint of child abuse. The October 1, 2012, letter to all bodies of elders provided instructions in connection with handling child abuse matters that may arise in the congregation. As questions come up from the field in this regard, what is outlined in these *Guidelines for Branch Office Service Desks* (S-66) should help you in formulating answers to some of these questions. Copies of the guidelines are only to be given to Branch Committee members and service desks. While references to the accused or to the victim are in the masculine gender, the guidelines apply equally to females.

2. The specific comments that are found below are not to be included in the letters the deskman may send out to answer questions raised by those who make inquiries but are for the guidance of the service desk only. As you consider each matter, do so prayerfully and carefully, allowing holy spirit to guide your mind and heart, so that any direction given to the field reflects divine wisdom and discernment as well as love and concern for the sheep.—1 Ki. 3:9; Prov. 2:1-12; Acts 20:28; 1 Cor. 2:10-13; Jas. 1:5; 1 Pet. 5:2, 3.

QUESTION 1: According to the January 1, 1997, *Watchtower* article, “a man known to have been a child molester does not qualify for a responsible position in the congregation.” Does that mean he would automatically be disqualified even if the molestation took place before his becoming a baptized Christian?

3. **Answer:** Not necessarily. Someone who has come into the truth has been ‘made new in the force actuating his mind and has put on the new personality.’ (Eph. 4:22-24) While he has been “washed clean” from sins committed prior to baptism, his past conduct could still have an effect on his qualifying for congregation responsibilities. (1 Cor. 6:11) Therefore, all of the factors would need to be carefully weighed. In any case, he should never be recommended hastily. In view of potential difficulty, although the elders make the recommendation, the final decision is always made by the branch office, not by the local elders.

4. The following questions should be considered when determining whether he qualifies to serve: How many years ago did he commit the sin? What was the extent of the conduct? Was it a single incident, or was it repeated? What were the circumstances? What was his age at the time? What was the age of his victim? Is there an outcry about him? Were the authorities ever informed of his actions? If so, what action did they take, and do they have him listed as a sex offender? How do the community and the secular authorities view him? If he were extended privileges, would this be disturbing to others, including the victim or the victim’s relatives? Has he ever been disfellowshipped, reprovved, counseled, or otherwise dealt with? Has he given clear indication by his words and actions that he is now guided by God’s spirit and can be trusted? (Rom. 8:5; Gal. 5:16) Has he demonstrated that he is “self-controlled”? (Titus 1:8; Gal. 5:23) Does he have a reputation of being “free from accusation,” “irreprehensible,” having “a fine testimony from people on the outside”? (1 Tim. 3:1-7, 10; 5:22; Titus 1:7) How do the victim and the victim’s relatives view him now? Are members of the congregation aware of what took place? How do they view him?

5. As to determining how a former child molester is now viewed when the abuse took place many years ago, there is no need for elders to conduct interviews either with members of the congregation or with the one wronged or with the wronged one’s relatives in order to determine what the current feeling is toward the former child molester. Doing so might bring up painful memories and cause further harm. Rather, from their *own observation*, elders are to evaluate and report the relationship between the victim and the former abuser, if possible.

6. On the other hand, if the elders believe it is necessary or prudent to approach the victim or the victim's relatives, they should contact the branch office for approval before doing so, providing the reasons why they believe it is necessary to do so. The branch office should consider very carefully how the victim and the victim's family would potentially be affected if they were to be interviewed.

QUESTION 2: What if a man who molested a child before getting baptized is already serving in a responsible position? Must he now step aside?

7. **Answer:** Possibly not, but it depends on the circumstances. The elders should consider the matter and make a recommendation to the branch office.—See the answer to Question 1.

8. **Factors to consider:** As with the previous situation, we believe there may be some circumstances that would enable him to continue serving. The elders would need to consider carefully the same questions and Scriptural principles outlined above. If he has served faithfully in a position of trust for many years, if there is no evidence of repeating his past wrongdoing, if his previous wrongdoing is known only by the responsible brothers, if the congregation has respect for him, if there is no outcry, and if everything else points to his currently enjoying Jehovah's blessing, we believe the branch office could allow him to retain his congregation privilege. Such a case would be decided on an individual basis.

QUESTION 3: If a man molested a child many years ago after getting baptized, could he retain his privilege of service? If so, under what circumstances could he continue to serve? Is there a certain amount of time that must have passed?

9. **Answer:** It is possible for him to retain his privilege. The elders should carefully consider the matter and provide full details in making a recommendation to the branch office. (See the answer to Question 1.) The following example illustrates under what circumstances a man might continue to serve: A Christian may have sexually molested a child many years ago, perhaps even several decades. The matter was handled at that time by the congregation. Since that time, he has had an exemplary record of theocratic service and has been serving faithfully. He has not repeated the sin, he has gone on record before Jehovah and the elders that there have been no other incidents of child abuse, and there is no evidence that he is a threat to children. Over many years he has performed "works that befit repentance." (Acts 26:20) In every respect, he has demonstrated himself to be chaste in conduct. All indications point to his having Jehovah's blessing. Given these circumstances and the fact that no present questions are being raised about his qualifications and there is no cry for his removal, we believe that he might continue to serve. Of course, each situation would be judged individually.

10. **Factors to consider:** In the case of an individual who has committed child abuse while baptized, if 20 or more years have passed and (1) the brother has built up a faithful record of service, (2) there is no outcry, and (3) everything else points to his currently enjoying Jehovah's blessing, the branch office may decide that a valid basis exists to allow him to continue to serve in a position of trust, if he otherwise qualifies.

11. If a former child molester continues in a position of responsibility—whether the sin occurred before or after baptism—there may be some serious problems if he later molests a child. This could bring great reproach on Jehovah's name, and it could affect the faith and confidence that our brothers have in Jehovah's organization. So the branch office is to consider this matter very carefully, weighing all the potential implications and factors before determining how a former child molester is to be used in the congregation.

Question 4: The January 1, 1997, *Watchtower* article on page 29 states that “a man known to have been a child molester” does not qualify for congregation privileges. What is meant by “known”?

12. **Answer:** “A man known to have been a child molester” has reference to the perception of the community and the Christian congregation. It may be one who has sexually abused a minor and who is still viewed negatively by the victim’s family, the congregation, or the elders, or it may be one who is viewed by the community or secular authorities as someone who is a sexual abuser of minors, whether the abuse has been established by the congregation or not. Such a man is not “free from accusation” or “irreprehensible.” Neither does he have “a fine testimony from people on the outside.” (1 Tim. 3:1-7, 10; 5:22; Titus 1:7) In view of his notorious past, people in the community would not respect him, and the brothers may even stumble if he were appointed.

13. **Factors to consider:** The term “known” needs to be qualified. At times, information regarding a man is known only to the elders. The fact that they have knowledge of his past sin should not automatically rule out his serving. There may be unusual circumstances that would indicate this is not necessary. At times, the branch office may determine that a man qualifies for congregation privileges, as he is not considered to be a “known” child molester. He may then move to another congregation. In such cases, the elders would not normally mention anything about his past conduct in the letter of introduction unless the branch office has determined that there is reason to do so.

14. In the case of a man who molested a child in the distant past, the branch office will advise the elders first to use him on a gradual basis *before* appointing him to a position of trust. In this way, he continues to build a record of righteousness, and this will often reveal whether the victim, or perhaps others, has concerns about his having privileges. For example, it may be he can be given duties such as passing microphones, operating sound equipment, and helping with literature or magazines. After the elders have observed him for a while and as he continues to build a commendable record, they may recommend to the branch office that he be allowed to use his home for meetings for field service or be given other special privileges, such as pioneering, offering congregation prayer, or other congregational assignments that require one to be exemplary. As he continues to give evidence of being guided by God’s spirit and if there is no apparent outcry, the elders may eventually recommend that he be appointed as a ministerial servant.

QUESTION 5: From a congregational standpoint, whom do we regard as “a child molester”?

15. **Answer:** The February 1, 1997, *Watchtower* “Questions From Readers” quotes *Webster’s Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary*, which defines “pedophilia” as “sexual perversion in which children are the preferred sexual object.” In referring to the article “Let Us Abhor What Is Wicked,” the above-referred-to “Questions From Readers” made the point that “what *The Watchtower* was discussing was a *child’s* being made the object of sexual abuse, including fondling, by an *adult*.” The January 1, 1997, *Watchtower* also refers to a child molester in the congregation as “a baptized *adult* Christian.” The October 1, 2012, letter to all bodies of elders says, “We are referring to situations in which it is established that an adult brother or sister has been guilty of sexually abusing a young child or has been sexually involved with a minor who is approaching adulthood who was not a willing participant.” Thus, from a congregational standpoint, “a child molester” refers to an adult.

16. In other words, child sexual abuse occurs when an adult uses a child to gratify his own sexual desires. It may involve what the Bible calls fornication, or *por-nei’a*, which could include manipulation of genitalia, sexual intercourse, and oral or anal sex. Some abusive acts, such as the fondling of breasts, explicitly immoral proposals, showing pornography to a child, voyeurism, and indecent exposure, may amount to what the Bible condemns as brazen conduct. (Gal. 5:19-21; *ks10*)

chap. 5 par. 10, second bullet point; g 10/07 p. 3, ftn.; g⁹³ 10/8 p. 10, ftn.) Since the adult involves a child in such activities, all of these actions would be considered child sexual abuse.

17. Yet, the level of seriousness is not the same in every case. (For instance, an adult who rapes a child or fondles the genitalia of a child would be much more culpable than someone who showed pornography to a child, even though such an unclean action could escalate.) Thus, the elders handling the matter would have to determine what the adult actually did.

18. **Factors to consider:** At times, the conduct of an individual may not be classified as child abuse from the perspective of the congregation, but from a legal standpoint he may be viewed as guilty of such. If his name appears on some public listing of sex offenders, he may not be considered one who is “free from accusation,” “irreprehensible,” ‘having a fine testimony from people on the outside’ and thus not qualify to serve in an appointed position or to be used for even minor privileges while this situation exists. (1 Tim. 3:1-7, 10; 5:22; Titus 1:7) However, this may need to be considered on a case-by-case basis.

19. Viewing child pornography is a serious violation of Jehovah’s standards, and any involved in such conduct would need strong counsel and, depending on the frequency and the extent of his viewing, could be subject to judicial action. (See the April 10, 2012, letter to all bodies of elders.) Nonetheless, if the one who views child pornography does not involve anyone else in his actions, this is not considered to be child abuse from a congregational standpoint. Still, the elders should be alert to the conduct of the individual and provide any appropriate Scriptural counsel in connection with his interactions with children.

QUESTION 6: At what age would we regard someone as an adult who could be guilty of child molestation? Is the age of the victim a factor?

20. **Answer:** The word “adult” is broadly defined, and so we cannot specify a certain age when one becomes an adult. From a legal standpoint, the definition depends on the area in which one lives. For instance, in the United States, one is often viewed as an adult when one is 18 years old. In other countries, the legal age may be defined differently. From a congregational standpoint, the Bible does not indicate a specific calendar age at which time one enters adulthood. Therefore, each case would need to be dealt with on an individual basis.

21. When judging whether an individual is a child molester, you would need to consider the ages of both the “molester” and the “child.” As pointed out in the October 1, 2012, letter to all bodies of elders, we are not referring to a situation in which an adult has had sexual relations with a minor who was approaching adulthood and who was a willing participant and who was only a few years younger than the adult. Rather, we are referring to a situation in which it is established that an adult brother or sister has been guilty of sexually abusing a young child or of sexual activity with a minor approaching adulthood who was not a willing participant. So it is important that the ages of both are considered. If some doubt exists as to whether an act constituted child molestation and whether privileges should be revoked, extended, or retained, the elders should refer the matter to the branch office and provide complete details.

22. **Factors to consider:** As already mentioned, the difference in age between the adult and the minor is a key factor. Also, what is the emotional and spiritual maturity of the minor? Has the minor already demonstrated a pattern of immoral behavior? For example, is the minor sexually active? Was the adult dating the minor with the consent of the minor’s parents and with a view toward marriage? Or is it apparent that the adult took advantage of the inexperience or immaturity of the minor? Again, each case would need to be evaluated on its own merits, since the age and maturity of the minor play a factor.

23. While minors who have sexual contact with minors are not considered to be child molesters by the congregation, it is still necessary for two elders to call the branch office. Elders should be alert to render spiritual assistance to minors in the presence of their believing parent(s), especially in the case of a minor who was taken advantage of by another minor who was significantly older.—See the October 1, 2012, letter to all bodies of elders, paragraph 18.

QUESTION 7: Should the elders ask a man who is reaching out for congregation privileges whether he has ever molested a child?

24. **Answer:** No. It is not the duty of elders to query an individual about whether he ever molested children. It would also not be appropriate for elders to arrange meetings to explain to brothers reaching out for privileges what is stated in the January 1, 1997, *Watchtower*. The point the elders should have in mind is that they should avoid recommending any “man known to have been a child molester.”

25. **Factors to consider:** When the branch office approves a recommendation for one to be a ministerial servant or an elder, we ask two elders to speak with the man before his appointment is announced. They will ask if there is anything in his past or in his personal or family life that would prevent him from being qualified to accept the appointment or if there is any other reason why his appointment should not be announced. If he has never *previously served* as an elder or a ministerial servant, the elders should specifically ask him if he has ever been involved in the past with child sexual molestation. If he confesses to sexually molesting a child in the past, then the S-2 form or S-52 appointment letter is returned to the branch office and the matter is reconsidered.—See the *Shepherding* textbook, chapter 3, paragraphs 12 and 13.

QUESTION 8: What does page 29 of the January 1, 1997, *Watchtower* article mean when it says that “a man known to have been a child molester . . . cannot be a pioneer”?

26. **Answer:** It means that if the perception of the community or the congregation is that a man is a sexual abuser of minors, he would not qualify as an auxiliary pioneer or as a regular pioneer.

27. **Factors to consider:** An auxiliary pioneer or a regular pioneer is to be “an exemplary publisher.” A person guilty of child abuse is not exemplary and would therefore not meet the qualifications of a pioneer. (See the *Organized* book, page 113, paragraph 2.) It is also understood that a known child molester would not qualify as a special pioneer, as a Bethel family member, as an international servant, as a missionary, for the traveling work, or for any similar special full-time service. This would be so even if he is not perceived by the community to be a known child molester. However, if the offense was many years ago, the answers to Questions 1-4 should be considered.

QUESTION 9: The January 1, 1997, *Watchtower* article says that a known child molester could “have parts in the Theocratic Ministry School and nonteaching parts in the Service Meeting.” What might these parts include? What other duties could he handle in the congregation? Are there other restrictions that would apply to him?

28. **Answer:** Anyone who is a known child molester is not exemplary and so there should not be extended to him any specific responsibility that could be construed as an assigned duty, even though some assignments might be considered minor. He should not be used to handle accounts, literature, magazines, or territories. Nor would he be used as an attendant, a microphone handler, an operator of sound equipment, or as one who represents the congregation in prayer. He would not be used as the reader at the Congregation Bible Study or the *Watchtower* Study or to conduct a meeting for field service. It would be advisable not to use his home for meetings for field service. And he would not qualify to auxiliary pioneer or regular pioneer. Although he could volunteer to assist

with general care of the Kingdom Hall where he attends meetings, he could not be approved to work on other Kingdom Halls or Assembly Halls. He may give student talks on the Theocratic Ministry School and share in nonteaching parts on the Service Meeting, provided that his doing so will not be offensive to those in the congregation who know of his past wrongdoing. In any case, he would not be given a teaching part, one that would normally be assigned to an elder or a capable ministerial servant who has cultivated good speaking ability.

29. He should not be allowed to use the Kingdom Hall for his wedding. Since he is not in good standing, it would be better for him to have the wedding ceremony in another location. Additionally, even after many years have passed, it would not be good to use his home for the meetings for field service since this may be a stumbling block for those who may know of the brother's past.

30. **Factors to consider:** A Service Meeting teaching part would include presenting a talk, conducting an interview, and handling a question-and-answer part. He would not qualify for these. Logically, the expression "nonteaching parts in the Service Meeting" would primarily refer to participating in demonstrations or interviews under the direction of an elder or capable ministerial servant. In the Theocratic Ministry School, he could only be assigned student talks.

QUESTION 10: What procedure does the branch office follow in handling letters of inquiry or reports that a publisher knows of an appointed one who molested a child in the past?

31. **Answer:** If the inquirer telephones the branch office, the service desk should ask him for the name of the accused person and, if available, the congregation where he attends. If there is an indication that the matter has already been reported to the branch office, the service desk can offer the caller spiritual encouragement and comfort, as needed. If it cannot be determined if the branch office already has a record of the matter, the call taker will listen to the caller's concerns, take note of the allegation, and encourage him to discuss his concerns with his local elders and to ask his elders to call the branch office. If the elders do not call within 24 hours, the branch office will call the elders. If the inquirer writes, an answer could be provided in harmony with the Scriptural principles presented earlier.

32. **Factors to consider:** It may be that letters will be received from publishers who say they know one who molested a child and who now has a congregation privilege. Some publishers have asked, "What responsibility do I have to report him?" Others have been very angry and have demanded his removal. Letters or calls may be received from elders asking such questions and expressing similar views.

33. The validity of the accusation should be verified to the degree possible. In the case of an elder's calling or writing, he should be informed of any legal responsibility he may have to report the matter to the authorities. Individuals should not be discouraged from reporting matters to the authorities but should be reminded of the need for confidentiality when speaking with others, thus avoiding any charge of slander.

QUESTION 11: What can the congregation elders do to protect children?

34. **Answer:** The elders should periodically remind parents of the need to review with their children articles in the organization's publications. (You may refer them to pages 170-171 of the book *Learn From the Great Teacher*.) Elders want to be alert to the activity of any who are known to have molested children in the past. As the January 1, 1997, *Watchtower* points out on page 29: "True, not every child molester repeats the sin, *but many do.*" An individual who has manifested a weakness in this regard should be sure he is never alone with other people's children. He should refrain from holding them or from displaying other forms of affection for them. He must recognize

that he has had a weakness in this area in the past. The advice at 1 Corinthians 10:12 is wise counsel for one who has shown this kind of weakness. In the spirit of Galatians 6:1, elders should kindly, but firmly, endeavor to readjust any who have had a problem in the past and seem to be showing affection to children or cultivating inappropriate association with such ones. It also would be appropriate for elders to kindly caution any who are doing things that may be a cause for concern to others in the congregation. (1 Cor. 10:32) By giving specific, clear, and pointed counsel, elders imitate Jehovah, who gives specific advice to help his servants avoid temptation. (See the March 15, 1970, issue of *The Watchtower*, “Questions From Readers,” pages 190-191.) At the same time, the response to this counsel by the former molester would be a basis for the elders to decide if he is determined to “abstain from every form of wickedness” and to clear himself of even any hint of wrongdoing. Does he in every respect demonstrate himself to be chaste?—1 Thess. 5:22.

35. When a former child molester (perhaps known only to the elders) begins attending congregation meetings or when a molester is shown mercy and is not disfellowshipped, designated elders should kindly, but frankly, discuss with him what type of actions regarding children he should clearly avoid. This would include not allowing children (other than his own) to spend the night in his home, not cultivating friendships with children, and the like. In addition, ensure that newly appointed elders are aware of his past history of child abuse and any of the restrictions that have been imposed.—See the October 1, 2012, letter to all bodies of elders, paragraph 12.

36. Additionally, a known child molester should be told not to work alone with children in the field ministry. He should always be accompanied by another adult publisher who is in good standing in the congregation. This also applies to working with his own minor children in the field ministry. If he chooses to do so, there still should always be another adult present. This serves to protect any minor who answers the door, the former abuser, and the reputation of the congregation. In some cases, Caesar may place the restriction that a former abuser cannot engage in house-to-house witnessing. (Rom. 13:1-7; Gal. 6:7) The elders could determine whether the restrictions apply to other forms of the field ministry, such as telephone witnessing, witnessing by means of electronic media, or letter writing. If allowed to share in these forms of service, the elders would arrange for him to do so in the company of another qualified adult publisher.

37. **Factors to consider:** This direction could apply in several situations, such as when a “known” former child molester begins attending congregation meetings, when a judicial committee determines that a child molester is repentant and will remain a member of the Christian congregation, or when a child molester is disfellowshipped and later cleans up his life and is reinstated.

38. Whenever the elders become aware of a sex offender living in the territory, they are to mark the address on the territory card as a “Do Not Call.” Thereafter, two elders should periodically visit the address, perhaps every six months to a year. They will verify whether the sex offender still lives there and give him an opportunity to hear the good news.—See the October 1, 2012, letter to all bodies of elders, paragraph 17.

39. What if a known child molester does not comply with the direction from the elders? Two elders should offer him firm but loving counsel. (Gal. 6:1; 2 Tim. 4:2) If after repeated counsel he continues to disregard the restrictions that have been placed on him, the elders should contact the branch office and explain the situation. The service desk will obtain the answers from the elders to the following questions: How often has the individual been counseled? What has been his response? What is he doing that is raising concern? Why do the elders believe that he lacks self-control and will continue to prey on children? Did the elders present a warning talk to the congregation? Has the body of elders concluded that his actions constitute brazen conduct and merit judicial action? The service desk under the direction of the Branch Committee will carefully examine all of these

factors in order to determine whether the individual should be considered a “predator” and whether the elders can proceed judicially.

40. If the branch office advises the elders to inform the parents of minor children that an individual is a “predator,” there is no need for elders to go into all the details with the parents. The elders would simply warn the parents that they should be sure to watch their children at all times when he is present. They should also tell the parents that there is no need for them to speak with others about the matter. The elders will take the lead in making sure that all parents of minor children in the congregation are aware. At the same time, the elders will inform the “known” child molester that the parents will be discreetly informed.

QUESTION 12: What should be done if a “known” child molester or one who is considered to be a “predator” moves to another congregation?

41. **Answer:** The normal procedure of sending a letter to the new congregation should be followed. As outlined in the February 1991 *Our Kingdom Ministry* “Question Box” and in the November 17, 2010, letter to all bodies of elders, our policy is always to send a letter of introduction when a publisher moves to another congregation. While this should be done in every case, it is imperative that this be done when a “known” child molester moves. As indicated in the *Shepherding* textbook, chapter 12, paragraph 20, the Congregation Service Committee, on behalf of the elders, should write to the new congregation’s body of elders and outline the publisher’s background and what the elders in the former congregation have done to assist him. Any needed cautions should be provided to the new congregation’s body of elders. This information is for the use of the elders only and should be kept in the congregation’s confidential files. The elders should send a copy of this letter to the branch office in one of the special blue envelopes. If a “known” child molester has moved and information about him has not been sent to the body of elders where he is now serving, then this should be done now. In the case of a “predator,” the elders of the congregation where the individual has moved will consult with the branch office to determine what warning should be given to the parents of minor children.

42. If more than 20 years have passed and a former child abuser has a good record in the truth and the branch office decides that he could be appointed to a position of trust—such as an elder, ministerial servant, or regular pioneer—the congregation elders will not have to pass on information regarding the past sin to another congregation’s elders.

43. **Factors to consider:** If an individual is disfellowshipped, there is no need to forward his *Congregation’s Publisher Record* (S-21) card or the confidential file to the congregation where he lives or attends meetings; however, a brief letter should be sent to the body of elders in whose territory he lives to inform them that a disfellowshipped person who was guilty of child abuse lives in their territory and, if known, they can provide the address. A copy of the letter should be sent to the branch office. No detailed information is sent to another congregation until the individual submits a request for reinstatement.—See the *Shepherding* textbook, chapter 10, paragraph 2.

QUESTION 13: Should the fiancée or wife of a brother who is restricted because of being guilty of child abuse in the past be informed about his past wrongdoing?

44. **Answer:** With regard to one who is married, he should note that the *Family Happiness* book says that marriage is based on love and respect. At 1 Corinthians 13:4-7, Paul states that love is “kind” and “does not look for its own interests.” Love also “rejoices with the truth.” Additionally, page 30, paragraph 8, of the *Family Happiness* book mentions this: “Those who wish to enjoy a happy marriage show respect for their mates by ‘keeping an eye, not in personal interest upon just [their] own matters, but also in personal interest upon those of [their mates].’ (Philippians 2:4) They

do not consider what is good only for themselves—which would be selfish. Instead, they consider what is best also for their mates. Indeed, they give that the priority.” Therefore, in the case of a known child abuser who is married, the elders should encourage the former abuser to share this critical information about his past with his wife if he has not already done so. ***The same would apply to a brother who is engaged or is contemplating marriage.*** Page 25, paragraph 21, of the *Family Happiness* book states: “An honorable courtship also includes honest communication. As your courtship progresses toward marriage, certain matters will need to be discussed openly. Where will you live? Will both of you work secularly? Do you want to have children? Also, it is only fair to reveal things, perhaps in one’s past, that could affect the marriage.” In view of this, you should alert a former child abuser of the importance of discussing his past abuse with his fiancée before marriage.

45. When inquiries are received from congregations, the elders may be directed to assign two elders to speak with each known child abuser to whom the above direction would apply. The elders may share the references cited above to help him appreciate the importance of complying with this direction. When meeting with the known child abuser, make him aware of the need to communicate this information about his past child abuse to his wife or fiancée. The elders should write, date, and sign a brief confidential memorandum for the former child abuser’s file. Thereafter, the elders can discreetly inquire of the wife or fiancée as to whether she was informed about his past abuse.

QUESTION 14: When should elders interview a young child who is a victim of child abuse?

46. **Answer:** When the elders call the branch office regarding a child abuse matter, they may ask about the need to interview the victim. In such cases, help the elders to balance the need to investigate with the dangers of inadvertently further traumatizing a young child abuse victim. For example, has the accused already confessed to the wrongdoing? Is there more than one accuser and thereby already sufficient evidence to handle the matter judicially? (Deut. 19:15; John 8:17) In such cases, there is likely no need to interview the young child.

47. If the branch office agrees for the elders to speak with the child, the service desk can share all or part of the following guidelines to help the elders thoroughly prepare for the interview. The service desk should also refer the elders to the principles found in the *Shepherding* textbook, chapter 12, paragraph 21, which will help them evaluate whether the testimony has the ring of truth.

48. Recognize the headship principle.—Eph. 6:2, 3.

- Be sure you have the consent of a parent or legal guardian to interview the child.
- Make every effort to have at least one dedicated parent or legal guardian present for the interview.

49. Conduct the interview in a loving manner.—Isa. 32:1, 2.

- Although it is preferred to have only one elder conduct the interview, another elder should be present as an observer.
- Be kind, unhurried, and establish a rapport with the child.
- Sit next to the child, rather than across from or standing over the child. This will be less threatening.
- Ask the parent to allow the child to tell the story without his interrupting or interpreting.
- You could inadvertently intimidate the child by asking the same question multiple times.
- You should not use dolls or toys in an attempt to recreate the event.
- Sincerely and frequently commend the child at appropriate times, knowing how difficult this interview may be for the child.

50. Ask questions skillfully.—Prov. 20:5.

- Start with open-ended questions, such as:
“Please tell us what you can about . . .”
“What else do you remember about . . .?”
- Then gently move to more focused questions, such as:
“Where did it happen?”
“Who else was there?”
“Please tell us more about what you can remember about . . .”

51. Give no cause for stumbling.—2 Cor. 6:3.

- If the child senses that the elders think they already know everything, the child may not feel the need to speak up. Biased, leading questions or statements like the following should not be used because they could influence a child to please the elders and change what he would otherwise have said:
“Did Brother So-and-so do something bad to you?”
“Brother So-and-so is such a nice person; I don’t see how this could be.”