

**Safe Church, Safe Pastor**  
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Recently, a survivor asked, "*What are the signs of a safe church, safe pastor?*" This is a powerful, compelling question!

Only victim/survivors know the terror of finding a safe church after they have been so deeply betrayed by a pastor. Usually, after the disclosure, almost all of victim/survivors have been driven from the church because the church does not understand the tragic issue of CSA—clergy sexual abuse. Many times the victim is blamed. The initial abuse by the pastor is devastating, but when the church turns their back, it is almost too much to bear.

The women we hear from love God and long to find a place to worship and connect with a church community. They want to find love, understanding, and most of all safety. They want to be healed but the church may become a hostile environment. Because they are afraid to trust again, many victims no longer are able to attend church. The ones who do, walk in with fear and trembling. It takes some years to be able to trust again.

In our experiences through the years of hearing from victims and observing church systems, we offer the following as guidelines:

**HOW HEALTHY IS THE CHURCH'S PAST, PRESENT, AND FUTURE?**

**Look at the Past.**

Does it have a reputation for conflict?  
How openly has the church dealt with conflicts in the past?  
Do they openly discuss trouble or do they pretend that everything is always okay?  
Have there been unethical or immoral incidents with leaders?

**Look at the Present.**

Is it healthy and thriving?  
Are the congregants respected and can they express their ideas?  
Do they take ownership for their church?  
Is there a healthy force of volunteers?  
Are congregants encouraged to develop and use their gifts within the Church Body?  
Can they come together without pretense?  
Are the ministries relevant to real life issues?

**Look at the Future.**

Is there a sense of vision?  
Are congregants enthusiastic about the future of the church?  
Do they take personal ownership of church's vision?

## **WHAT DOES SAFE LEADERSHIP AND CHURCH'S POLICIES LOOK LIKE?**

### **Look at the Governing Board or Council.**

Are the leaders elected by the congregation?

Is the board or council involved in decision making? (*They do not automatically rubber-stamp the pastor's wishes.*)

### **Look at the Church's Policies.**

Do the pastors and staff members have windows in their doors?

Does the church have a written policy detailing steps to insure integrity within the church staff?

Does the church have a written policy detailing steps to be taken if the pastor, staff member, or a person in leadership falls into moral failure?

Does the church understand clergy sexual abuse (CSA)?

Would they take responsibility to see that: the offender is removed? The victim finds healing?

## **WHAT DO SAFE PASTORS LOOK LIKE?**

### **Safe pastors are committed to personal integrity.**

They have a network of people who hold them accountable and ask them the hard questions.

They are accountable as to where they are during their office hours. If they leave the church, they need to inform the office manager as to where they can be found.

They should have a healthy relationship with their spouse.

Do they speak appreciatively of their spouse?

When they are together, is there obvious enjoyment of each other?

They spend quality time in sermon preparation and minimal time in counseling.

They should show respect for the people in the congregation when speaking from the pulpit or on a personal level.

### **Beware if:**

**Pastors micro-manage the church structure.**

**Pastors isolate themselves and never relate to their congregants.**

**Pastors preach down to or attack congregants from the pulpit.**

**Pastors manipulate with flattery and charm.**

**Pastors display inappropriate touching and hugging.**

\*It is of utmost important that the Church be a safe place. The sheep of the flock need a shepherd to guard them, especially the vulnerable.

### **Pastors and leaders,**

**“Care for the flock of God entrusted to you. Watch over it willingly, not grudgingly—not for what you will get out of it, but because you are eager to serve God. Don't lord it over the people assigned to your care, but lead them by your good example. And when the head Shepherd comes, your reward will be a never-ending share in his glory and honor.”**

**( I Peter 5:2-4)**