



Physical Contact

"A touch can be good, bad or confusing..."

"I was only trying to comfort her." "I was only being friendly." "I didn't mean anything by it." How can these things be interpreted as sexualised behaviour? The action was performed with the best of intentions, the comment was made in jest, yet it was perceived as being abusive. How can that happen?

Boundaries

The key to understanding where the boundaries are is understanding the person on the receiving end of our good intentions. A touch can be good, bad or confusing. A good touch makes the person feel good about who they are, affirmed, cared for and supported. A bad touch makes them feel harmed, disregarded, in pain or danger or threatened. A confusing touch makes them feel unsure of the relationship or uncomfortable. Similarly, what we say can be good, bad or confusing.

Good intentions are not enough. Those in a position of authority within the church must ensure that appropriate boundaries are maintained at all times.

There are all sorts of people in the world, with all sorts of boundaries and all sorts of personal histories that make them react in different ways. Those in a position of authority within the church must be aware that it is their responsibility to ensure that these boundaries are not crossed.

Sadly, some leaders within churches have heard the discussion about boundaries and have reacted by removing all touch. A better approach would be to learn about boundaries and modify behaviours to ensure that the bad and confusing touches are removed and the good touch remains. After all, church is family and what is a family without touch?

What is appropriate touch?

Within a church there are hundreds of interactions between people, some of which involve touch. So what guidelines can help those in authority within a church work out whether or not to touch someone?

The Safe Church Code of Conduct provides some guidelines, specifically about when touch is not permitted. For example, in point 7:

“...you will not, among other things, engage in or condone:

- physical contact that is inappropriate to the situation or uncomfortable or confusing for the receiver, including kissing, hugging, touching, pinching, patting or aggressive physical conduct
- touching any sexual part of the body, including the “only kidding” or accidental occasions of sexual touch.”

The Safe Church Code of Conduct still uses words like “inappropriate” in relation to touch in these circumstances because every situation, just like every person, is different. Working on understanding the boundaries, learning to recognise the difference between the touch that most people would consider appropriate and touch that is inappropriate, is what the Safe Church Code of Conduct is about.

Within the bounds of the Safe Church Code of Conduct, there is the ability for leaders to touch those under their care for pastoral, medical, instructional and safety reasons. Appropriate touch is something that leaders must learn.

Some hints

Here are some hints to help you work out if touch in a specific situation is appropriate:

- Does it cross a boundary set out in the Safe Church Code of Conduct? If it does, don't do it.
- Consider if the person is particularly vulnerable for some reason and modify your touch to make it safer.
- Consider the person's cultural background and what may or may not be considered appropriate in that culture.
- Don't assume that someone wants to be touched. Just because you would in a situation doesn't mean that they do.
- Use an open hand in the centre of someone's back to comfort. Don't put your hand on someone's knee or around a woman's upper arm.
- If in doubt, ask. Seeking permission from someone before you touch them is the best way to work out if it is OK. For example, “I can see you are distressed. Would you mind if I put my arm around you?”
- If you need to touch someone for medical, instructional or safety reasons, let them know beforehand.
- If a particular activity involves touch, for example at a youth group activity where a particular game or activity needs to be demonstrated, ask for a volunteer. Be explicit about where you will be touching, for example, around the waist.
- When accidents happen, apologise immediately and make sure that someone in authority knows what happened so that your actions are visible and you are accountable.

