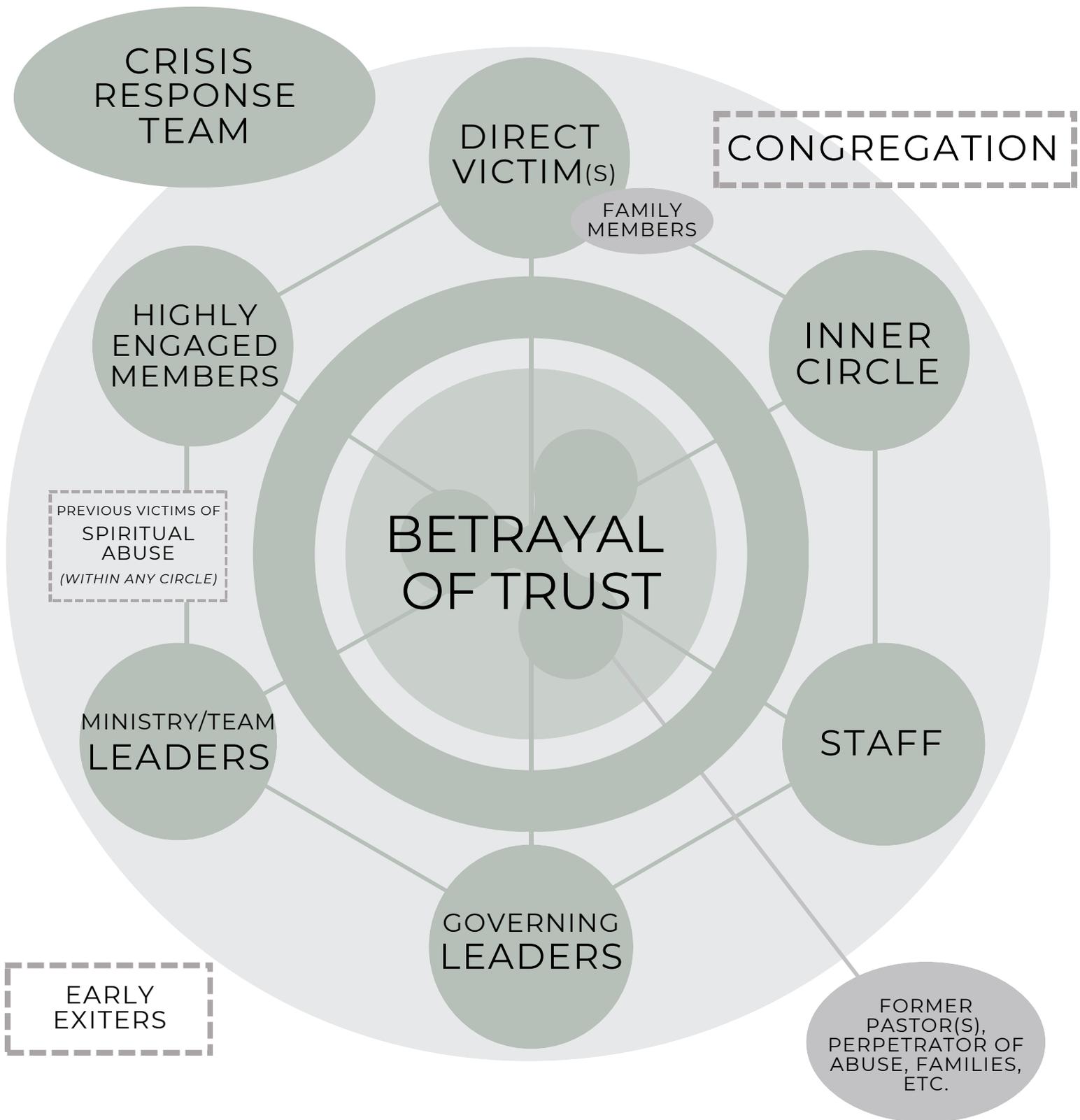


CIRCLES OF IMPACT

Abuse and misuse of spiritual authority involves a betrayal of trust and that requires long-term care and the building of resilient faith for all parties impacted.



Understanding the

CIRCLES OF IMPACT

When a spiritual abuse crisis occurs, people are affected in widening circles of impact, based on their proximity to the harm, their relationship to those involved, and their level of involvement in the church's life. Those closest to the center often experience the greatest intensity of shock, grief, and disruption, while those farther out may still feel confusion, sadness, or destabilization.

Understanding these circles helps a crisis response team recognize that care cannot be one-size-fits-all and that different groups will need different kinds of support. At the bottom of this document you will find tabs that will guide you through identifying individuals within each circle of impact so that care can be offered thoughtfully and responsibly. Please note that some people will fit into multiple categories and may require layered support depending on their needs.

THOSE IMPACTED	
DIRECT VICTIM(S)	<i>Victims of manipulation, control, or clergy sexual abuse have experienced substantial grooming to be faithful to their spiritual leaders and to see them as good and holy. The weight of the world has been placed on their shoulders. Often, they've been convinced that seeking help would be an act of betrayal and would destroy the church they love, along with their abuser's reputation. Whether whistle-blowers or victims who've been exposed, they've been under the spiritual abuse of power and must be lovingly, patiently, and gently cared for in the most devastating season of their lives.</i>
INNER CIRCLE	The inner circle is primarily comprised of staff and volunteers who served most closely with and around the pastor and/or his or her family. Typically, this group includes any assistants, direct reports, etc. – those most closely impacted by the fall-out that will come from this betrayal of trust and the accompanying heartbreak. This group is not always defined strictly by position but by the degree of personal connection, determining the level of care needed. This small group of people closest to the offender may be rocked by this discovery or may be victims themselves. It is very normal to uncover, over time, that manipulation, abuse, or inappropriate behaviors have been prevalent in relationships between the spiritual leaders and this group as well.
CHURCH LEADERS	Church leaders at every level, whether team leaders, elders, staff members or volunteers, are now in the difficult position of facing betrayal as well as leading their congregation through the aftermath of abuse. Typically, these leaders have been serving long hours and/or lending their names, reputations, vision, and voices to a ministry that has been undermined by sin and spiritual abuse. These leaders need to be informed, prayed for and cared for as they in turn help care for others impacted by the betrayal - and as they relearn healthy church leadership.

Understanding the
CIRCLES OF IMPACT

HIGHLY ENGAGED MEMBERS	<p><i>Highly engaged members—those closely involved in the life and leadership of the church—often experience the betrayal in a more visceral and disorienting way than the broader congregation. For this reason, clear and compassionate education about spiritual abuse of power (and, when applicable, the reality that clergy sexual abuse is not an affair) is paramount. Special care is needed to help these members understand the nature of the power imbalance at play, especially when some may feel tempted to cling to a former image of a trusted leader rather than face painful truth. Gently and truthfully educating highly invested members is essential—not only for clarity, but for their own long-term healing.</i></p>
CONGREGATION	<p>Initially the larger church body, though deeply impacted, will tend to experience the betrayal less viscerally than those in leadership. The need for education regarding a spiritual abuse of power (and the reality that clergy sexual abuse is not an affair, if pertinent) is paramount. Special care is needed to help the congregation understand the nature of the imbalance of power. Some might prefer to stay blinded to this rather than give up the image they may have had of a particular leader. Gently but truthfully educating the congregation will be essential for their own healing down the road.</p>
SPOUSE(S)/ FAMILIES	<p>The spouse and families (and sometimes extended families) of both the victim(s) and perpetrator will have their worlds rocked as moral failures and misuse of power are uncovered. Initial responses may vary, but these individuals are facing a deep betrayal of trust, as well as shame and often overwhelming rejection within the church body. Caring for the families of those involved is a tender task.</p>
PREVIOUS VICTIMS OF SPIRITUAL ABUSE	<p>Previous survivors of spiritual abuse who have become involved in another spiritually abusive church are a particularly vulnerable group. Finding themselves in another compromised situation, they likely carry layered wounds and may experience self-doubt, heightened disillusionment, and exhaustion. Care for this group must be gentle, patient, and trauma-informed. Survivors will need affirmation that being harmed again is not a personal failure but a reflection of how hidden and deceptive abusive systems can be. Support should focus on helping survivors feel safe, naming unhealthy patterns, and rebuilding trust in their ability to discern the Holy Spirit. They will need to be encouraged to move at their own pace while being offered compassionate support, repeated reassurance, and freedom from pressure to “figure things out quickly.”</p>
EARLY EXITERS	<p>Brave souls involved in an unhealthy or abusive community may recognize red flags significantly earlier than others on staff or within the congregation. Although they sometimes try to affect change from within, they often find they have to step away from the community they love—and because of the nature of controlling cultures, they often lose relationship with those they once considered friends.</p>
CRISIS RESPONSE TEAM	<p>Those entrusted with bringing care to those impacted are likely reeling from this betrayal of trust, as well. In early days this may be elders, deacons, or the leadership team, but establishing a designated team made up of those who are not in the epicenter will be helpful down the road. All of those responsible for care and leadership within the church will need gentleness and good care themselves.</p>