



Caring Well

A REPORT FROM THE SBC SEXUAL ABUSE
ADVISORY GROUP

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In response to the revelations of a sexual abuse crisis in American society and recognizing that such abuse has occurred within our Southern Baptist churches, Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) President J. D. Greear commissioned a Sexual Abuse Advisory Group. He tasked the group with considering how Southern Baptists at every level can take discernible action to respond swiftly and compassionately to incidents of abuse, as well as to foster safe environments within churches and institutions.

This report is the product of that inquiry, in which the Advisory Group listened to and learned from hundreds of survivors of sexual abuse, and church leaders, and national experts in this field. It includes the personal words and testimonies of many of those survivors. Additionally, it aims to begin to educate our churches on the abuse crisis, equip our churches to care well for survivors, and prepare our churches to prevent abuse. The purpose of this Sexual Abuse Advisory Group report is to convey the key findings that have emerged from this effort in a way that reflects on the realities of the past, recognizes the challenges of the present, and resolves to embrace the opportunities of the future.

SUSAN CODONE, A SURVIVOR OF CLERGY SEXUAL ABUSE IN A SOUTHERN BAPTIST CHURCH

The disruption of my life began at age 14 in my small Southern Baptist church a few miles outside of Birmingham, Alabama. For months, my youth minister had showered me with flattering attention, telling me that God had chosen me to help his ministry. This grooming led to 18 months of progressively worse sexual abuse, layered with threats. When I could not tolerate the abuse any longer, I told the only person whom I thought could stop it—my pastor. Implausibly, he was not receptive, and suggested that maybe I had brought it on myself.

Now put your feet in my teenage Nikes and try to comprehend the extent of this evil. I had no way of knowing that my pastor not only knew about the abuse, but also was having an affair with my Sunday School teacher; the two ministers were locked in their own secrecy battle and had checkmated each other with blackmail, to my detriment. My pastor's response was to fire the youth minister and pick up with me where the youth minister had left off. For another year, I stared at the worn carpet in my pastor's office while he told me about pornography and activities I was still too young to understand, praying for the horror to stop. Finally, a deacon caught my pastor in his affair, and my horror ended. Yet for years I remained locked in my own silent prison, held quiet by the deadbolt of their threats to harm my family if I told anyone. Meanwhile, they moved on to churches throughout Alabama during their careers and likely abused others.

I am living proof that sexual abuse has been overlooked for many years in Southern Baptist churches. The research literature in medicine, psychology, and counseling overflows with studies suggesting that sexual abuse, as an adverse childhood event, results in a predictable adult life cycle of depression, anxiety, mood disorders, post-traumatic stress disorder, substance abuse, isolation,

hopelessness, suicidality, and more. When it occurs in the church, the additional trigger of spiritual betrayal instigates extensive self-blame and pervasive shame. When we encounter trauma, we most often search for God, but what happens when trauma occurs in the church? Sexual abuse in the church is a desecration, a violation of the most sacred role and relationship, a trauma leaving emotional and spiritual blinders. It kills the spirit. It is evil of the highest order.

It is a children's Sunday School answer to say that sin is the cause, and superficial at best. The cause of sexual abuse in the SBC is rooted in our culture of casual indifference to predatory sexual behavior. This indifference is the expressionless face of denial and silence. Worn like a shield, indifference results in the catch-and-release practice of catching predatory staff members in the act and releasing them to move freely among other churches and organizations and harm others.

This practice may pretend to protect the institution, but not the victims.

Indifference also leads to the upside-down prioritization of mercy over justice, demonstrated by the persistent

protection of vaunted leaders who have clearly abused young people. When our churches, agencies, and seminaries try to act first out of mercy rather than justice when confronting sexual abuse, we marginalize both the victims and God Himself.

Likewise, we see this look-the-other-way indifference in our systemic failure to use law enforcement in favor of “just dealing with it in the church.” Sexual abuse is not a mistake, bad behavior, a reaction to stress, or a lapse in judgment. It is a crime, and abusers must face arrest and prosecution. In Southern Baptist culture, we have reversed God’s design; forgiveness and mercy originate from the victim and from God, not from the church as an employer. Determining innocence or guilt belongs to the courts. Sexual abuse is sin, but in classic preaching mnemonics, the sin driving sexual abuse is empowered by our culture of Silence, Indifference, and Neglect.

Sexual abuse in the SBC is an epidemic powered by a culture of our own making. The work of the Study Group will not stop this epidemic right away. It takes years of purposeful work to change the culture of indifference and develop a cure for such a poison. However, the Study Group’s work can serve as a vaccine, inoculating our churches with the conviction of the deadened sin that has harmed so many. It takes a movement to change the culture, not a mandate, and movements begin with the undeniable burden that things are not right the way they are and must change. In this movement, we are not an autonomous group of 47,000 churches; we are accountable as one body and capable of leveraging our enormous collective power to topple the culture of indifference. Sexual predators won’t stop just because we start paying attention. We will never rid ourselves of their evil, but we can reduce the risk and protect our own. Do you feel the conviction that things are not right the way they are? I have lived it deep in my soul for over 30 years. We have a path forward that is within our collective power. Will we take that path and fight this evil, together as one?

Dr. Susan Codone¹
Macon, Georgia

¹ Dr. Susan Codone is a native of Birmingham, Alabama, and works as a professor and university administrator in Macon, Georgia. She is a graduate of the University of Montevallo, the University of West Florida, and the University of South Alabama. She and her husband George have been married for 29 years and have three young adult children. They are members of Ingleside Baptist Church in Macon.

INTRODUCTION

In the past two years, our country has had a public reckoning with how widespread sexual abuse² is throughout all areas of our society. Leaders from every community that makes up our country have begun grappling with what next steps should be taken—for healing, for justice, and to prevent future abuse. Leaders within the Southern Baptist Convention recognized that not only did many of the men and women sitting in our very pews bear the deep scars of sexual abuse, many had, in fact, experienced such abuse within the confines of the church itself. At the 2018 SBC annual meeting, Ethics & Religious Liberty Commission Executive Vice President Phillip Bethancourt made a motion requesting for the newly elected SBC president to form a task force to address the issue of abuse. Determined to act quickly

and comprehensively to root out such abuse and make our churches safe havens where survivors of sexual abuse can experience healing and hope, newly elected SBC President J.D. Greear formed the Sexual Abuse Advisory Group soon after the annual meeting.

The group was tasked with considering how Southern Baptists at every level can take discernible action to respond swiftly and compassionately to incidents of abuse, as well as to foster safe environments within churches and institutions. The group was to study both how Southern Baptists are currently engaging these issues and develop recommendations in consultation with relevant SBC entities on strategies and resources for ministering to victims and protecting people and churches from predators.³

Greear commented on the formation of the new advisory group:

How we as a convention of churches care for abuse victims and protect against vile predators says something about what we believe about the gospel of Jesus Christ. Our churches should be a refuge for the hurting and a safe haven for the oppressed. Over the next year, I look forward to hearing from this group and partnering with our churches, state conventions, local associations, seminaries, and national entities to determine what we can do to equip churches to minister effectively and stand guard against any who would seek to prey on the vulnerable.

Russell Moore, president of the Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission (ERLC), affirmed the need for a sexual abuse advisory group:

Sexual assault and sexual abuse are Satanic to the core, and churches should be the ones leading the way when it comes to protecting the vulnerable from predators. . . . We as a denomination, though, owe it to our pastors and churches to come together and provide the very best resources and recommendations possible to address this crisis.

This report details the advisory group’s findings from the past year of listening to and learning from survivors of sexual abuse, church leaders, and our nation’s foremost experts and professionals in this field. The stories, statistics, and steps forward told within these pages are the first of what will need to be many steps in the coming weeks, months, and years.

Scripture tells us that every human being bears the image of Christ and thus has inherent dignity.⁴ We must not rest until Southern Baptist churches are places where this dignity has been restored to survivors of sexual abuse and where leadership at all levels fights against the scourge of sexual abuse in all its forms and never covers over or protects abusers.

We are committed to becoming churches that are safe for survivors and safe from abuse.

Mary DeMuth,⁵ Survivor of childhood sexual violence, author and advocate:

We tell our stories, and a drop of truth lands on the dry ground. The ground sings back. Alone, that would be the conclusion to the story—dry ground absorbing one small raindrop. But another story is told, and another drop wets the ground. And another. Then another. And slowly, beautifully, powerfully, the stories carve a pathway through, and that pathway becomes a trickle where others with painful stories refresh themselves. Before long, this trickle becomes a stream that heals the nations. And soon it is a powerful river of justice⁶

2 For purposes of this report, sexual abuse is an all-encompassing, non-legal term that refers to crimes like sexual assault, rape, and sexual abuse. The American Psychology Association defines sexual abuse as “unwanted sexual activity, with perpetrators using force, making threats or taking advantage of victims not able to give consent.”

3 Elizabeth Bristow, “Southern Baptist Convention President Announces Formation of Sexual Abuse Presidential Study Group,” ERLC, July 26, 2018, <https://erlc.com/resource-library/press-releases/southern-baptist-convention-president-announces-formation-of-sexual-abuse-presidential-study-group>.

SCOPE OF REPORT

The sexual abuse crisis that has been revealed across America over the past few years, and in our specific context within the Southern Baptist Convention, is one that has been festering for many decades. It is not a new problem, nor a simple one. We recognize that rooting out abuse and guiding survivors toward healing will not be simple either. It will take the work of many people, and we will need many approaches to heal the deep wounds that so many of our congregants bear daily. This report is not intended to be exhaustive, nor is it intended to be fully prescriptive. We would never presume to be able to fully encapsulate the scope of the devastation that this evil has wreaked on so many survivors and communities. Nor do we believe that we can develop an adequate comprehensive response in the bounds of these few pages.

Firstly, the aim of this report is to begin to illuminate the evil that has occurred within our midst by sharing the stories of survivors of sexual abuse. John 1:5 tells us that, “*The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.*”⁴ We know that only when darkness is exposed can it then be rooted out. We seek to begin to shine a flashlight into the darkness in the coming pages.

We are very grateful for the brave men and women who have shared their horrific stories of abuse in order that our entire church body can appreciate the enormous—and at times systemic—scope of the problem we are facing. We are also grateful for the men and women who have been raising this banner for many decades. They have boldly told their stories and advocated on behalf of the survivor

community, even when they faced silence. Their efforts were not in vain, and they have helped to get our Southern Baptist community to a place of repentance and action today.

Secondly, we aim to help churches who are eager to make their churches safe for survivors and safe from abuse. Again, we acknowledge that the recommendations laid out here are just the beginning, and many more years of resource development and healing are to come. We will, however, not allow perfection to be the enemy of progress, and so this report begins the process of resourcing churches with immediate actions they can implement to make their churches safe for survivors and safe from abuse.

One final note: This report has required collaboration and cooperation from many Southern Baptists this year, and we pray that this first step will help Southern Baptists and Southern Baptist churches move forward. But we acknowledge that this report is a first step of many. Significant developments have occurred on a number of important items that are outside of the scope of this report to address, such as strengthening screening for abuse in the ordination process, potential enhancements to the Annual Church Profile, possibilities regarding a database solution, and ways for churches to publicly indicate the positive steps they have taken. Work is ongoing in each of these areas and others, and we will continue to provide updates in the future.

We pray expectantly that God will take our meager efforts here and spark a movement of healing and reform.

Additional Notes:

- **WARNING:** Graphic Content. Some of the stories in the pages that follow have graphic content related to sexual violence.
- Out of respect for the survivors who have bravely come forward to share their nightmares with us, many of the names in this report have been changed or listed as anonymous. Each survivor was given the choice as to how they would be identified in the report.

4 Genesis 1:27

5 Mary DeMuth is an author of over 40 books including, *Thin Places: A Memoir, Not Marked: Finding Hope and Healing After Sexual Abuse, Healing Every Day: A 90-Day Devotional, We Too: How the Church Can Respond Redemptively to the Sexual Abuse Crisis*.

6 Mary E. DeMuth, *We Too: How the Church Can Respond Redemptively to the Sexual Abuse Crisis* (Eugene: Harvest House Publishers, 2019).

7 International Standard Version

Share

EDUCATE YOUR CHURCH TO UNDERSTAND ABUSE.



SECTION SUMMARY

Considering the sheer number of cases of sexual abuse in Southern Baptist churches and the horrific details of the abuses perpetrated can be overwhelming and paralyzing. How has this happened? How have SBC churches and institutions failed to recognize the prevalence of sexual abuse in the past? How can we mobilize a restorative response in the future?

This section aims to analyze and recognize the prevalence of Southern Baptist sexual abuse so that we can better educate our churches and institutions moving forward. In order to care for survivors and prepare our churches, we need to understand some of the underlying issues and how we have come to be where we are.

As we bring to light the sin and wickedness that has taken place in our midst, we must also lament the wrong that has been done. We lament for every man, woman, and child who bears the image of God and has had that image desecrated by the evil of sexual violence. 2 Corinthians 7:10 tells us that *“Godly sorrow brings repentance that leads to salvation and leaves no regret, but worldly sorrow brings death.”* We lament for the wrongs done among us so that we can repent, turn from evil, and lead the hurting world around us to the cross of Jesus Christ—the only thing that can ultimately save us from this present darkness.

FRAMING THE PROBLEM:

As this advisory group conducted interviews and heard testimonies, a few common problems stood out in the responses of churches to reports of sexual violence. Far too often, responses have been characterized by minimizing or dismissing a survivor’s story, signifying a failure to understand the trauma and ongoing danger faced by those who have been abused. Rather than seeking to respond in a way that shows holistic care, we have far too often been complacent, telling ourselves we “have done enough,” and leaving thousands of hurting individuals in our wake.

This has been an issue for years and years. Not only in the Southern Baptist Convention but across North America. And we’ve put it off and sometimes hid behind our autonomy that we couldn’t do anything about it. And it is so critical at this time, at this juncture, that we step out and provide the leadership to do this, to protect the entire next generation. We’ve waited way too long and the time is now to act.⁸

Dr. Kevin Ezell, President, NAMB, Our Church Cares Curriculum

THE PREVALENCE OF SEXUAL ABUSE

Although research varies on the prevalence of abuse in America, the commonly accepted rates of abuse from the most frequently cited sources are staggeringly high.

- The Center for Disease and Prevention cites that 1 out of 3 women and 1 out of 4 men have experienced sexual violence involving physical contact at some point in their lives.⁹
- The Department of Justice cites that 1 in 4 women and 1 out of 6 men are sexually abused before they turn 18.¹⁰
- A study by Dr. David Finkelhor at the Crimes Against Children Research Center found that 1 out of 12 youth have experienced sexual victimization, including sexual assault (32 per 1000) and attempted or completed rape (22 per 1000).¹¹
- According to the Rape, Abuse, and Incest National Network (RAINN), every nine minutes, Child Protective Services substantiates, or finds evidence for, a claim of child sexual abuse.¹²
- The American Medical Association cites that more than 700,000 women in the United States are sexually assaulted each year, or 1 every 45 seconds.

8 Brad Hambrick, *Becoming a Church That Cares Well for The Abused* (Nashville, TN: B&H Publishing Group, 2019).

9 CDC, “Preventing Sexual Violence,” Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, April 1, 2019, <http://www.cdc.gov/features/sexualviolence/>

10 David Cantor et al., “Report on the AAU Campus Climate Survey on Sexual Assault and Sexual Misconduct” (The Association of American Universities, September 21, 2015).

11 D Finkelhorn, “Characteristics of Crimes Against Juveniles” (Durham, NH: University of New Hampshire, 2012).

12 “Children and Teens: Statistics | RAINN,” RAINN, 2019, <https://www.rainn.org/statistics/children-and-teens>.

But these statistics only begin to tell the story. Actual incidences of sexual abuse far exceed reported incidences of sexual abuse as most survivors do not report their abuse. Research shows that 60% of child sexual abuse victims never tell anyone they have been abused.¹³ The Bureau of Justice Statistics (BJS) reports that the majority of rapes and sexual assaults perpetrated against women and girls in the United States between 1992 and 2000 were not reported to the police. Only 36 percent of rapes, 34 percent of attempted rapes, and 26 percent of sexual assaults were reported.¹⁴

Whichever statistics or studies you choose to cite, the rate of sexual violence is unconscionably high, and warrants a vigorous, God-honoring response from the Christian community.

Sexual Abuse Rates within a Church Context

Most alarming, for the purposes of this report, is the rate of incidences of abuse that have been reported within a church setting. According to three insurance companies that insure a majority of Protestant congregations in the United States, there are approximately 260 annual reports of children being sexually abused by ministers or other church workers.¹⁵ Additionally, researchers Donna Eshuys and Stephen Smallbone¹⁶ found that, contrary to what many Christians believe, the sex offenders who are most committed to church throughout their life (what the researchers called “stayers”) accumulated the most victims and the youngest victims of all sex offenders. They found that a perpetrator’s involvement in a church community did not seem to deter their criminal sexual behavior, in fact it seemed to worsen it. It is dangerous to assume that we don’t have offenders in our congregations.

As the experts from Darkness to Light stress,

Those who molest children look and act just like everyone else. There are people who have or will sexually abuse children in churches, schools, and youth sports leagues. Abusers can be neighbors, friends, and family members. People who sexually abuse children can be found in families, schools, churches, recreation centers, youth sports leagues, and any other place children gather.¹⁷

Furthermore, the preconceived notion that most incidences of sexual abuse are perpetrated by strangers is a myth. In fact, the majority of survivors of sexual abuse know their abuser. The Department of Justice found that 3 out of 4 of female adult victims knew their offender.¹⁸ Additionally, 90% of child victims of sexual abuse know their perpetrator.¹⁹ While it’s tempting for Christians to believe that our communities are safe, the fact of the matter remains that we all know survivors of sexual abuse even if we don’t know who they are specifically. Time and time again, as survivors bravely come forward, an all-too-common refrain is heard: “We never thought it could happen in our church or our community.”

As the body of Christ, charged with being His hands and feet in a broken world, we weep and lament the devastating impact on each person that makes up these statistics. Behind each number is a face, a story, a precious person created in God’s image. No matter if the abuse occurred within our church walls, on a college campus, or hidden inside a home, we grieve the violation that each statistic represents, and resolve to be a beacon of hope and healing to survivors and a safe haven free from abuse for future generations.

13 K London et al., “Disclosure of Child Sexual Abuse: What Does the Research Tell Us about the Ways That Children Tell?” *Psychology, Public Policy, and Law* 11, no. 1 (March 2005): 194–226.

14 “Reporting of Sexual Violence Incidents,” National Institute of Justice, accessed May 29, 2019, <https://www.nij.gov:443/topics/crime/rape-sexual-violence/Pages/rape-notification.aspx>.

15 “Data Shed Light on Child Sexual Abuse by Protestant Clergy,” *The New York Times*, June 16, 2007, <https://www.nytimes.com/2007/06/16/us/16protestant.html>.

16 Donna Eshuys and Stephen Smallbone, “Religious Affiliations Among Adult Sexual Offenders,” *Sexual Abuse: A Journal of Research and Treatment* 18, no. 3 (July 2006): 279–88.

17 “Child Sexual Abuse Statistics: Perpetrators,” Darkness to Light, November 22, 2015, http://www.d2l.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/Statistics_2_Perpetrators.pdf.

18 Michael Planty et al., “Female Victims of Sexual Violence, 1994–2010: (528212013-001)” (American Psychological Association, 2013), <https://doi.org/10.1037/e528212013-001>.

19 D Finkelhorn, “Characteristics of Crimes Against Juveniles” (Durham, NH: University of New Hampshire, 2012).

**EVERY
98
SECONDS**

another
American is
assaulted

<https://www.rainn.org/statistics/scope-problem>



1 OUT OF 3 WOMEN &



1 OUT OF 4 MEN

have experienced sexual violence
involving physical contact at some
point in their lives. (CDC)

12

over a third of all sexual
assaults involved a victim who
was under the age of 12. (DOJ)

1 IN 4 WOMEN
& **1 IN 6** MEN
are sexually abused
before they turn

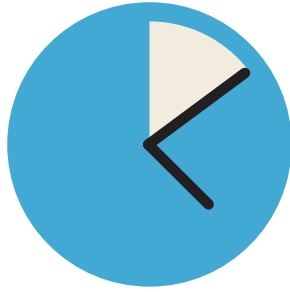
(Source: DOJ)

18

60%

of child sexual
abuse victims
never tell anyone

(Source: D2L)



EVERY 9 MINUTES,

Child Protective Services substantiates, or finds evidence for, a claim of child sexual abuse.

(RAINN - Rape, Abuse, and Incest National Network)

3 OUT OF 4

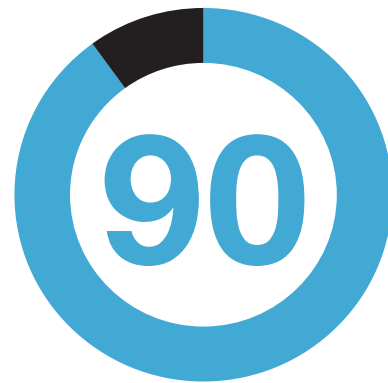
female adult victims knew their offender

(Source: DOJ)

MORE THAN 700,000

women in the United States are sexually assaulted each year, or one every 45 seconds.

(American Medical Association)



90%

of child victims of sexual abuse know the perpetrator

(Source: D2L)

OUT OF EVERY

1000 SEXUAL ASSAULTS 995 WILL WALK FREE

(RAINN)

THE EFFECTS OF ABUSE

The devastation of sexual abuse does not end when the abuse stops. The physical, emotional, mental health, and spiritual effects of abuse reverberate for a lifetime.

Studies show that children who are sexually abused have a significantly greater risk of developing emotional and mental health issues into adulthood, including post-traumatic stress and other anxiety symptoms, depression, and suicide attempts.²⁰

In fact, *Darkness to Light* reports,²¹

- Adult women who were sexually abused as a child are more than twice as likely to suffer from depression as women who were not sexually abused.²²
- Adults with a history of child sexual abuse are more than twice as likely to report a suicide attempt.²³
- Females who are sexually abused are three times more likely to develop psychiatric disorders than females who are not sexually abused.
- Among male survivors, more than 70% seek psychological treatment for issues such as substance abuse, suicidal thoughts, and attempted suicide.²⁴

But the effects of abuse do not end with emotional and mental health. Research shows significant effects in a survivors' physical well-being as well.

In the “Impact of Early Life Trauma on Health and Disease,” the authors found that, “Biomedical researchers increasingly recognize that childhood events, specifically abuse and emotional trauma, have profound and enduring effects on the neuroregulatory systems mediating medical illness as well as on behavior from childhood into adult life.”²⁵ The authors said they came to realize that “In the context of everyday medical practice, . . . the earliest years of infancy and childhood are not lost but, like a child’s footprints in wet cement, are often lifelong.”

Additional research shows that adverse childhood experiences (ACEs), of which sexual violence is most certainly one, put children at “a greater risk of several negative health outcomes in adulthood, including poor self-rated health, chronic diseases, functional limitations, premature mortality, and poor mental health.”²⁶ Adult survivors are at greater risk of a wide range of conditions and are 30% more likely than their non-abused peers to have a serious medical condition such as diabetes, cancer, heart problems, stroke, or hypertension.²⁷

Abuse prevention expert, Victor Vieth writes, “As humanity grows its knowledge through ACE and spiritual injury research, as well as sex offender studies, we gain a deeper insight into the depth of Jesus’ wisdom in his concern for children and also his engagement with the sinful condition of humankind, a condition which only God fully understands.”²⁸

20 J.J. Broman-Fulks et al., “Sexual Assault Disclosure in Relation to Adolescent Mental Health: Results from the National Survey of Adolescents,” *Journal of Clinical Child and Adolescent Psychology* 36 (2007): 260–66.

21 “Child Sexual Abuse Statistics: Consequences,” *Darkness to Light*, December 4, 2015, http://www.d2l.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/Statistics_5_Consequences.pdf.

22 P. Rohde et al., “Associations of Child Sexual and Physical Abuse with Obesity and Depression in Middle-Aged Women,” *Child Abuse & Neglect* 32 (2008): 878–87.

23 S.A. Dube et al., “Long-Term Consequences of Childhood Sexual Abuse by Gender of the Victim,” *American Journal of Preventive Medicine* 28 (2005): 430–37.

24 C. Walrath et al., “Children with Reported Histories of Sexual Abuse: Utilizing Multiple Perspectives to Understand Clinical and Psychological Profiles,” *Child Abuse & Neglect* 27 (2003): 509–24.

25 Ruth A. Lanius, Eric Vermetten, and Clare Pain, eds., *The Impact of Early Life Trauma on Health and Disease: The Hidden Epidemic* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 77.

26 See the following: Paul R. Amato, “Parental Absence During Childhood Depression in Later Life,” *The Sociological Quarterly* 32, no. 4 (1991): 543–56; Shawn Bauldry et al., “A Life Course Model of Self-Rated Health Through Adolescence and Young Adulthood,” *Social Science & Medicine* 75 (2012): 1311–20; Amy E. Bonomi et al., “Association between Self-Reported Health and Physical and/or Sexual Abuse Experienced Before Age 18,” *Child Abuse & Neglect* 32 (2008): 693–701; Vincent J. Felitti et al., “Relationship of Childhood Abuse and Household Dysfunction to Many of The Leading Causes of Death in Adults: The Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) Survey,” *American Journal of Preventive Medicine* 14, no. 4 (1998): 245–58; Michelle Kelly-Irving et al., “The Embodiment of Adverse Childhood Experiences and Cancer Development: Potential Biological Mechanism and Pathways Across the Life Course,” *International Journal of Public Health* 58, no. 1 (2013): 3–11; Steven Stack, “The Effect of Divorce on Suicide in Denmark, 1951–1980,” *The Sociological Quarterly* 31, no. 3 (1990): 359–70.

27 N. Sachs-Ericsson et al., “Childhood Sexual and Physical Abuse and 1-Year Prevalence of Medical Problems in the National Comorbidity Survey,” *Health Psychology* 24 (2005): 32–40.

28 Victor I. Vieth, *On This Rock: A Call to Center the Christian Response to Child Abuse on the Life and Words of Jesus* (New York): Wipf & Stock, 2018), 31.

WENDY, SEXUAL ABUSE SURVIVOR, AGE 50

I was sexually molested as a child by my father, my uncle, a family friend, and several babysitters. I was also exposed to classmates who acted out sexually. As an adult who has been educated about child sex abuse, I now understand my classmates were also victims of child sex abuse.

I told this to no one until I was an adult. I'm still (at 50 years old) not quite sure why not.

I came to Christ in third grade at an AWANA program at a Baptist Church. After a little growth in the Word, I was completely and totally immersed in secular life and a dysfunctional home. I had absolutely no idea how the sexual violation was intensely traumatic to all aspects of who I was. In fact, I remember thinking it was interesting how it hadn't had an impact on me at all.

I was terribly wrong.

I was promiscuous as a teen and through college. I knew it was wrong. I often wondered why even though I knew it was wrong and I had been taught by my mother (who knew nothing of my abuse) that my body was only mine and that God's design for sexuality was in marriage, that truth seemed to matter not at all. And the answer was not simply because I loved sin, it felt good (it didn't), and I wanted to defy God's plan.

The answer is far more complex. And the answer seems completely illogical to those who don't understand the effect of trauma. These issues aren't processed logically in the prefrontal cortex. They impact much deeper in a victim's neurology and in a different part of the brain.

The imprint of what was done to me was and is ever present, even when I'm not conscious of its effect. It affects my relationships into the present, including my marriage of 27 years. And this is true even though I am a new creation in Christ who knows her identity is in Him alone. This is true even though I have experienced much healing. It's deeper than most will ever realize. And God knows and understands and weeps with those who've been hurt. As is often the case with women I meet, it may seem to those on the outside looking in that we are overcomers in Christ (we are) who have it all together (we don't). I have a post undergraduate degree and have experienced professional, personal, and ministry success (all by God's grace, of course.) I say this only to highlight that women like me are everywhere around you in your churches. They are ministry and corporate leaders, moms, volunteers, and faithful church members.

So in order for the leaders of the SBC to understand how to become churches that CARE and families that support healing, you must understand the impact of trauma on the whole person: body, mind, spirit (The Body Keeps the Score, Van der Kolk M.D.). And you must be places where full healing is embraced (medical, therapeutic, and spiritual).

You must not trivialize trauma's impact with Bible verse bandaids and call it good. God calls you to more. To become church families survivors can trust, you'll need to do the slow, hard work of education and of presence – with staying power. You must show survivors the never ending love of Jesus who wants to heal us from the inside out and whose patience and love never run out. We must be the compassion, gentleness, empathy, kindness, and long suffering of Jesus to those who need to heal.

And you must be churches who prioritize the safety of the children in your sacred charge far more than you prioritize risk mitigation, liability concerns, or reputational cover up.

I cannot emphasize this sufficiently. You must choose.

I believe God has allowed the curtain to be lifted so those in authority could SEE, WEEP, LAMENT, REPENT, and CHANGE. *I pray that within the power and structure dynamics of the SBC, you will lead out in SPIRITUAL ways, not in corporate modalities. I pray you will seek the face of God for wisdom for the way forward, that you will have courage beyond what you could imagine to take right action in the face of difficulty or those who are stuck in the ways of old.*

Now that you've seen and you know, please don't avert your eyes or hedge on your resolve. Move forward by the power of the Spirit of the Living God.

Spiritual Abuse

Layered on top of the devastating mental and physical effects of sexual violence are the spiritual effects a survivor will face when grappling with their abuse, especially if that abuse occurs within a church context.

Vieth writes:

When the perpetrator is a member of the clergy, the impact on the victim's spirituality is often heightened. This happens, in part, because clergy abusers often use their religion to justify their abuse of children and then communicate these collective distortions to their victims.²⁹

Grief and trauma specialist John Schuetze puts it this way:

Child abuse causes children to stumble in the faith in many ways. Later in life it can trigger sinful behavior to cope with the painful memories. It often confuses the person spiritually and theologically: "If there is a God why didn't [God] help me? If God promises to answer our prayers, then why didn't [God] stop my abuse? I prayed about it many times."... Jesus recognized children were valuable and vulnerable.³⁰

Research finds that church attendance among survivors decreases, they are less likely to trust God, and their relationship with God often ceases to grow.³¹ Although a strong and responsive church community can and should be a source of healing and comfort for a survivor of sexual violence, it has not always been the case. When abuse has been mixed with twisted theology or survivors have been met with skepticism or shame within their church community, the effects on their faith can be devastating.

Many survivors who spoke to this study group disclosed how their abusers used theology as a way to manipulate

and silence them. One survivor detailed how his youth minister used scriptures about David and Jonathan's relationship to explain that his sexual abuse was ordained. Another disclosed that her pastor told her that God had spoken to him and wanted the two of them to have a "special relationship," which ended up being a full year of his sexual molestation of her. Clergy abuse not only encompasses abuse to children, but also a "consensual" adult sexual relationship between a clergy member and a congregant. The power and spiritual influence that a member of the clergy wields over their congregants essentially renders consent impossible. Clergy can be especially effective at the grooming process, breaking down appropriate boundaries and manipulating their victims. They often get the benefit of the doubt as spiritual leaders, can leverage their positions of power to manipulate others, can play the victim card if they are caught, and can spiritualize the situation to minimize personal responsibility.

Scripture tells us that God is deeply angered and grieved when anyone pushes children away from Him.³² Jesus even chastises his closest disciples for keeping children from him in Mark 10:13-16. In the Scripture, this was about people physically keeping children from him. But it's clear both from this Scripture and others that Christ is talking about anything that anyone does to create stumbling blocks for children to place their child-like faith

²⁹ Vieth, *On This Rock*, 8.

³⁰ *Ibid*, 28

³¹ Barbara McLaughlin, "Devastated Spirituality: The Impact of Clergy Sexual Abuse on the Survivor's Relationship with God and the Church," *Sexual Addiction & Compulsivity* 1, no. 2 (April 1994): 145-58, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10720169408400039>.

³² Matt 18:6-9; Luke 17:1-2; Mark 9:42

NATHAN MURRAY, SURVIVOR OF CHILDHOOD SEXUAL ABUSE

As a middle schooler, I became friends with my church youth pastor, Dan. Even though he was 10 years older than me, we developed a friendship outside of church. As I entered high school we began to hang out more, and Dan began grooming me by exposing me to pornography. His abuse began to escalate, and although he never touched me, he would frequently expose himself to me, among other things.

During the season of abuse, Dan talked often about wanting us to have a deep Biblical relationship, much like David and

Jonathan. At the time I was unable to realize the gravity of what was happening to me or the spiritual manipulation that was taking place. It wasn't until I graduated college and sought professional help that I began to process what a healthy relationship even was. Even now, I have trouble developing friendships with other men. As soon as someone tries to get close to me, I have this sinking feeling of what are they wanting from me.

Following the years of abuse I became addicted to pornography. Luckily, my addiction came to light and friends encouraged me to seek professional counseling. It was sitting in my counselor's office on a weekly basis for over one and a half years that I began to realize Dan had sexually abused me. That was a decade ago,

and thankfully I am now beginning to heal and process what happened to me as a child.

Several years ago I learned that Dan was teaching Sunday school at a local church. I contacted the head pastor to let him know about my abuse and warn him about Dan. The pastor made it clear that this was a matter he didn't want anyone to know about, because he didn't want anyone to be "embarrassed."

I was crushed. How many other kids had been hurt by Dan? How many more would be hurt in the name of keeping up appearances that everything was alright in our churches?

in him. Even further, one cannot overstate the truth that all people are created in God's image. And when sexual abuse and violence are perpetrated against anyone of any age by people claiming to be spiritual leaders, let there be no doubt that God is angered and grieved. And we as His Body and Church should be as well.

RECOGNITION AND LAMENT OF FAILURES IN OUR PAST

"Predators often target faith communities because our mishandling of sexual assault means that churches are one of the safest places for predators to flourish."

- Rachael Denhollander at Valued Conference

For many Southern Baptists, the recent news of the widespread occurrence of sexual abuse in our churches is surprising. For those who have not lived through the tortures of both abuse and an inadequate response to that abuse, it has been easy to believe the problem is "out there," rather than in our own congregations. Events in the past year, however, have shocked us out of ignorance and revealed many of the ways in which we have failed to protect those in our churches from the horrors and injustices of abuse.

We recognize failures have occurred in many ways, including:

- Failing to adequately train our staff and volunteers—on the national, state, and congregational levels—to be aware of and respond appropriately to abuse
- Using church autonomy improperly to avoid taking appropriate action

- Failing to care well for survivors of abuse
- Failing to take disclosure seriously and to believe the survivor
- Failing to report abuse to civil authorities
- Recommending suspected perpetrators to new employment
- Promoting political, institutional, and congregational leaders whose language and behavior glorifies mistreatment of women and children

We lament the fact that it took a national movement of reckoning for abuse to force us to take this issue seriously in our own convention. It should now be obvious that the problem has been and still is more widespread than anyone has realized, affecting our congregations all over the country, from the smallest church pastored by a bivocational minister to the megachurch with hundreds on staff. Abuse has known no bounds, affecting seminaries, mission boards, and denominational entities, including our own. And all too often, it has not been handled justly.

We believe this is a decisive moment in the Southern Baptist Convention. The past year has been a gracious wake-up call, and we must recognize where we have failed, correct the error of those sins, and move forward in love and truth.

ABIGAIL, SEXUAL ABUSE SURVIVOR, AGE 30

Abigail was a student at a Southern Baptist institution of higher education when she was raped on campus by a male student. When Abigail went to the administration to report the heinous crime and seek help, she was forced to meet with male leadership from the school. Through sobs, Abigail detailed the attack and explained that she had been anally raped. The school leader told Abigail that what happened to her was not in fact rape, because it was not a vaginal penetration. The leader explained that anal rape isn't rape at all so Abigail had nothing to worry about and had no need to report the incident to the police. He said, "Don't worry, he didn't take anything from you. Your future husband will still think you are a virgin." Abigail was told not to tell her pastor or anyone else as they wouldn't understand. Abigail walked out of the leader's office broken and confused, truly believing that she had not been raped.

Recalling the meeting years later, Abigail says, "I can't remember the facial expressions of the male leadership, but I can tell you every detail about their shoes. I couldn't bear to lift my eyes to meet theirs. I felt so much shame."

How Did We Get Here?

Sexual violence is a sin and a crime. It is a sin in which perpetrators seek power through the manipulation and degradation of the vulnerable. It is a sin that can be traced from Genesis through to Revelation. Perpetrators use whatever means necessary to subdue and abuse their victims.

Abusers use many methods of manipulation and deception within the church context to mask their abuse. Some hide behind church polity and structure; others teach false doctrines to justify their actions; while still others use right theology, but manipulate it in ways to perpetuate their abuse.

Russell Moore explains,

What we are dealing with in the sexual abuse of the vulnerable is, after all, demonic (and I mean that quite literally). And that means that the devil, and those carrying out his will, are able to hide behind, and to use, virtually any ideology or theology or church structure. Evildoers can hide behind church hierarchy (as we've seen), and behind church autonomy. They can hide behind systems where leaders are mandatorily celibate or in systems where the leaders have families with double-digit numbers of children. They can hide behind theologies that minimize "gender roles" or in those that exaggerate them.

The point is not that we shouldn't examine all of those things, to see whether our beliefs are right. The point is that we shouldn't think that making a correction here or there will absolve us of the need for constant need for vigilance. Some theologies lead to horrible consequences, yes. Some church structures lend themselves to a lack of accountability and should be revised. But, after all of that, we must recognize that there is no safe harbor from this horror, this side of the New Jerusalem. That means that, whatever our theological tribe and whatever our denominational system, the struggle to keep children and other vulnerable people safe cannot stop with a revision to a confession of faith or an amendment to a by-law.

We must all be on watch. We must all be constantly examining not only how we may have wrong theologies, but just as much examining how predatory people can use "right" theologies too for awful ends.³³

³³ Russell Moore, "Does Theology Cause Sexual Abuse?," Russell Moore, April 2, 2019, <https://www.russellmoore.com/2019/04/02/does-theology-cause-sexual-abuse/>.

Recognizing that evil will always seek the destruction of the vulnerable, we have identified several common ways abuse has been able to occur within our church body.

Addressing Misapplication of Theology Surrounding Abuse within the Church Context

Acknowledging the many missteps in the past requires us to examine the underlying causes—the roots infecting and affecting individuals and institutions. All abuse is sin, and it has occurred and been permitted in part because a misapplication of theology has borne itself out in various contexts and situations. While this is not an exhaustive study of theological problems surrounding abuse within church contexts, the following are some of the areas we must address and correct:

Failure to Recognize and Value God's Image in Every Person

We have failed to follow Christ's example in loving vulnerable people in our churches and communities. Quick to teach that all people are created in God's image, we nevertheless undermine that teaching when we neglect to properly care for women, children, and the least of these, as modeled by our Savior (Matt. 18:6, John 4:26).

We see this neglect in many ways, including:

- Wrong teaching that leads to treatment of women and children as inferior to men in value, intellect, and discernment
- Misapplication of complementarian teaching, leading to women submitting to headship of all men
- Failing to provide proper spiritual, physical, emotional, and mental care for survivors of abuse
- Tending to believe testimony of the accused over disclosing abuse
- Failing to recognize abuse in the home and call abusers to account

Failure in Understanding the Doctrine of Sin

As individuals, churches, and institutions, we have failed to grasp the depravity of sin and its consequences. The Bible tells us our hearts are deceitful (Jer. 17:9) and that none of us is righteous (Rom. 3:10), but we have responded with surprise and often denial when people who appeared good were accused of great harm. Many times, our low view of sin blinds us to the great evil of which people are capable.

We see this doctrinal failure in many ways, including:

- Minimizing sin, seen in use of terms like "mistakes" and "mess ups"

- Blaming those who have suffered abuse, characterized by a lack of understanding of or refusal to see the impact of grooming and power dynamics. We see this in questions put to the victim, such as, “What were you wearing?” and in terms like “sexual sin” rather than “abuse” and “assault”
- Rushing to believe a perpetrator has “changed,” rather than understanding that some temptations and struggles are ongoing, and safeguards must be put in place
- Falsely believing spiritual warfare that would see the Enemy as attacking the perpetrator but not the person suffering under the perpetrator’s abuse
- Neglecting to bring sin into the light, choosing instead to keep it in darkness, where it can only thrive and grow (1 John 1)
- Equivocating that because we are equally sinful (true) that there are not additional responsibilities when sin is also criminal.

JENN GREENBERG, SURVIVOR OF ABUSE AT THE HANDS OF HER CHURCH-GOING FATHER³⁴

I grew up in faithful Christian churches. As a child, I sat attentively through sermon after sermon every Sunday, and sometimes weekday Bible studies too. As soon as I could spell, I began taking notes and writing down questions to ask our pastors afterwards. They were all loving men. Good teachers. Faithful shepherds. They never guessed I was being abused.

I remember my dad teaching me how to commit suicide when I was 5 years old, just in case I ever felt the need to escape. Around that same time, my pastor was teaching me tee-ball. I had a crush on his little boy, Peter, who I was in kindergarten Sunday school with.

I remember, when I was 10, my dad beating me repeatedly because I’d laughed and played dolls too loudly. Around that same time, I remember professing my faith to our church leaders, and an elder saying, “Never let anyone question your salvation because you don’t remember the day on which you were saved. Being saved when you were too young to remember is an incredible blessing from God.”

I remember, when I was 12, my dad threatening to shoot me if I ever tried to leave him. Around that same time, my pastor and his wife saying how mature I was for my age. I babysat their children, and she later boasted to the other moms at church that she’d come home to a clean kitchen and her laundry folded. She couldn’t believe how helpful I was.

I never made any “cries for help.” I was always the good kid. The overachiever. I made cries for acceptance. Cries for appreciation. Cries for acknowledgement. Cries for love. But while my father taught me that I had to earn his love, meet his standards, and beg for mercy he’d never grant, my pastors taught me about my Father in Heaven. His love was freely given,

his Son met all the standards for me, and his Spirit was lavished irrevocably upon me.

Because you see, abuse revolves around a false doctrine of legalism; arbitrary rules, inevitable failure, manipulation, fear, and painful consequences. Because my pastors preached grace, they unwittingly contradicted my abuser’s lies. And every Sunday I listened and dreamed of the day I’d finally feel accepted, belonging, and loved in Heaven.

This is my message to pastors and church leaders: get to know your covenant children. Be the person kids know they can go to for prayer requests, loving counsel, and personal advice. And keep in mind that abusers often change the meanings of words. So when a child says, “My parent spanked me,” ask, “What do you mean?” Because spanking can mean anything from a swat-on-the-bottom to being beaten black and blue. I still remember examining my 10-year-old body and seeing hand-shaped bruises on my arms, legs, and back. When a teenager says, “My parent grounded me,” ask “Really? How?” Because grounding can mean anything from loss of television privileges, to being locked in a room for two days without food.

I do not write this to discourage you, but to encourage you. Pastors, teachers, men of God; you are God’s shepherds who guard Christ’s sheep. Keep preaching the Gospel. Never waiver. Never relent. Never water it down because it is oxygen and life to the oppressed and the brokenhearted. Declare the mercy of the Father, the atonement of Jesus, and the wisdom of the Spirit without apology or hesitation because there are people in very dark places who are listening.

Thank you for your ministry, your sacrifice, and your dedication to God’s children. You may never know how many souls you helped save, or how many children decided to stay alive because you preached the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

³⁴ Jenn Greenberg was abused by her church-going father. Yet she is still a Christian. In her book, *Not Forsaken*, she reflects on how God brought life and hope in the darkest of situations. Jenn shows how the gospel enables survivors to navigate issues of guilt, forgiveness, love, and value. And she challenges church leaders to protect the vulnerable among their congregations.

Misapplication of Confession, Repentance, and Forgiveness of Sin

In an attempt to restore peace and harmony, we have rushed through these biblical commands, often to serve the interests of the perpetrator over the person who has suffered abuse at his or her hands. The Bible gives us a model of repentance that includes restitution to the offended party (Num. 5:7, Luke 19:8), but our model has often required no evidence of true repentance and instead has placed a burden on the abused.

This failure has been seen in various ways, including:

- Neglecting to ask hard questions of the perpetrator and failing to require him or her to address and take steps to repair damage as a demonstration of repentance
- Failing to go straight to civil authorities when an action is both sinful and illegal, allowing the appropriate authorities to investigate the matter
- Extending grace and mercy to those who are not repentant
- Offering a faulty forgiveness that tolerates sin
- Conflating forgiveness with a removal of consequences
- Forcing survivors to face and forgive their abusers on the church's timeline

Confusion Over the Doctrine of the Church

We have failed to understand the distinction between the authority of the church and that of the state. By neglecting to report abuse to the legal authorities, we have spared abusers from the natural and legal consequences of their actions and have placed those within our care in great danger. In the Kingdom of God, we are required to submit to the governing authorities (Rom. 13:1-5), and allegations of abuse must be handled accordingly.

Not only have we failed to report crimes, but we have misunderstood the way God equips and uses His church in the advancement of His Kingdom. By elevating the importance of the reputation of the church or institution, we have sacrificed honesty for optics, justifying the means by the ends of "church growth." Rather than seeing church growth as something God gives and removes for His purposes, we have pursued it at high cost to the most vulnerable members of our congregations.

We see this in many ways, including:

- Attempting to cover up or silence allegations of abuse because we believe it could damage the reputation of the church or of Christ
- Elevating leaders to inappropriate platforms and

pedestals upon which they are revered and believed to be indispensable

- Creating cultures where pastors and leaders cannot be questioned and where accusers are seen with skepticism and fear, rather than love and concern
- Emphasizing competency over character in our hiring practices. We are quick to see power and a dynamic talent, but undervalue humility and a shepherd's heart.
- Lacking a John the Baptist's mentality: "He must increase, but I must decrease" (John 3:30)

Misunderstanding that Sexual Abuse is Not Only Sin—But a Crime

So often church leaders receive reports or outcries that involve child sexual abuse or peer sexual abuse and respond as if the behavior is simply a sin, like premarital sex or a spouse having an affair. The church then attempts to address the matter only through steps of repentance, reconciliation and restoration. This creates a number of problems. The child is further traumatized when required to confront the abuser, and the trauma is compounded by ministry leaders requesting or requiring the abused child to accept an apology and 'forgive and forget'. Sometimes, churches with this mindset then allow an abuser to remain in the ministry by appearing 'repentant' and agreeing to a restoration plan. Such actions set up a situation which allows the child who has been abused to watch the abuser or sexually aggressive child get care and attention for this sexual sin, and the abuser or sexually aggressive child continues to move within the ministry with a great deal of freedom, likely manipulating access to additional children. Often, when such matters are viewed only as being 'sinful' but not criminal, they are not reported to the authorities. .

MinistrySafe Founders and Sexual Abuse Attorneys Gregory Love and Kimberlee Norris describe the "reporting problem" this way:

Child sexual abuse is sinful; but it is also criminal. Every state in the United States has mandatory reporting statutes that require most, if not all, adults to report suspicions of abuse and neglect. Protecting children from abuse is a compelling state interest, which trumps most assertions of privilege in communication (attorney/client, counseling, clergy, medical). When church leaders fail to report, the impact on the child, the family, and other victims cannot be overstated. Not only is the child harmed, justice is not served and the abuser continues to move freely to groom and molest again. Every church leader should know the state-specific reporting laws, prepare

a reporting plan, communicate that plan to all ministry stakeholders.

When in doubt, report.³⁵

Misunderstanding of Church Autonomy

Church autonomy has been one Southern Baptist doctrine that has been misunderstood in the context of sexual abuse within the church. Church autonomy is a valid reason that some things can't be done, but it is not a valid reason that nothing should be done.

Baptist Scholars Amy Whitfield and Keith Harper explain the SBC structure this way:

The Southern Baptist Convention is not a hierarchical religious denomination. It is a Convention of churches that choose to cooperate with one another. . . . Autonomous churches have complete control over their own affairs. . . . Cooperation means that a church chooses to be in friendly relationship and to be sympathetic with the purposes and work of the Convention. It chooses to stand with all the other churches and contribute resources together toward common values and goals. . . .

It is possible for a church to fall out of cooperating status with the Convention if it does not meet the prescribed standards. However, this does not mean that the Convention has any authority over the affairs of the local congregation. It simply means that the church no longer has a share of authority in the affairs of the Convention.³⁶

This structure *should* be utilized to allow each pastor to provide the justice and healing needed to stop abuse, turn perpetrators over to the justice system, and provide safe havens for victims. Instead, leaders in some churches have provided cowardly cover for perpetrators and have claimed to be dispensing mercy while withholding it from victims, and instead allowing injustice and evil to flourish.

Russell Moore speaks incisively and convictionally about why this is so dangerous and can no longer be excused:

Moreover, *church autonomy is no excuse for a lack of accountability*. Yes, in a Baptist ecclesiology each congregation governs its own affairs, and is not accountable to anyone “higher up” in a church system. And yet, the decisions a church makes autonomously

STEPHANI, SURVIVOR OF SEXUAL ASSAULT ON HER COLLEGE CAMPUS

“Sexual Abuse is multifaceted, a survivor can project confidence and true beauty on one side while at the same time feeling alienated and worthless. I am thankful for this report and the leaders who showed bravery in compiling it. Now the real challenge begins. We must forge ahead without being deterred by opposition. Not as a denomination but rather as a collective group of sinners saved by grace. We must produce a solution that is adequate to meet the needs of victims appropriately. The implications of this movement are far bigger than church safety or even victims of sexual abuse. They are that when justly acknowledging our wrongs with the grace and mercy of a loving and righteous Savior, we not only speak for these victims but also for those who have not yet told their story. We speak to those who do not know our Savior but are most certainly watching.

Over time, I have come to terms with the magnitude that sexual abuse and the implications of covering it up have played in my life. I am blessed that through my Savior, I have found joy far superior to my pain. My most fervent prayer for this council is that it begin a chain reaction of the same result for countless others.”

³⁵ MinistrySafe to Sexual Abuse Advisory Group, June 1, 2019.

³⁶ Amy Whitfield and Keith Harper, *SBC FAQs* (Nashville, TN: B&H Publishing Group, 2018), 24.

determine whether that church is in good fellowship with others. A church that excuses, say, sexual immorality or that opposes missions is deemed out of fellowship with other churches. The same must be true of churches that cover up rape or sexual abuse.³⁷

Moving forward, we must determine to no longer allow our church structure or its leadership to hinder justice or healing for survivors of sexual abuse. We, instead, must utilize our Convention to encourage policies and practices that protect the vulnerable, “maintaining the witness of Christ in the holiness and safety of his church.”³⁸

EDUCATING OUR CONGREGATIONS ON SEXUAL ABUSE

In the spirit of lament and repentance, it is now time for the SBC to resolve to educate our leaders and congregations on the crisis of abuse that is plaguing our church and our community. By bringing to light the staggering statistics of abuse, the pervasive and lasting effects of abuse, and acknowledging the ways we have failed to protect the vulnerable and meet the needs of survivors, we can begin to mobilize our congregations towards becoming the beacon for protection, hope, and healing Christ has called His church to be.

Author and survivor of sexual abuse, Mary DeMuth, recalls what it is like to tell her story of sexual abuse in the church setting:

When I tell my story, some recoil from it, no doubt wishing I would just be quiet and not speak of the past. Sexual abuse and trauma are painful, and the shame of those experiences thrives in darkness. One

sad truth I’ve learned over the years is that the church doesn’t like messy. The church prefers a neat, victorious story, tied up with a cliché bow, full of manufactured piety and pasted-on “joy.” Seldom is there room for questions, wrestling, anguish, grief, or bewilderment because that somehow connotes that those who were harmed are not “walking in faith.”

In order to become churches who enter into the pain and healing of the abused, we must be willing to enter into the messy reality of abuse and not hide from the reality that is surrounding us.

Victor Vieth has challenged the church to “not do anything new but rather something very old... to return to the message of Jesus and center our responses to child abuse on the words and actions of Christ.”³⁹ We need to remember Jesus’ words in John 10:10-14 that, “The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full.” He goes on to call his leaders to protect their flocks, ensuring no predators are allowed in their midst.

There are many faithful churches who for generations have lived out Christ’s message for protecting the vulnerable among them. As a Convention, we must follow their example, moving forward as one body committed to answering the call of our Savior to shine His light into this present darkness.

37 Russell Moore, “Southern Baptists and the Scandal of Church Sexual Abuse,” Russell Moore, February 10, 2019, <https://www.russellmoore.com/2019/02/10/southern-baptists-and-the-scandal-of-church-sexual-abuse/>.

38 Ibid.

39 Vieth, *On This Rock*, 3.

CHRISTA BROWN, ADVOCATE & SURVIVOR OF SEXUAL ABUSE IN A SOUTHERN BAPTIST CHURCH

“Even with childhood histories of horrific abuse - of having been molested, raped and sodomized by Baptist preachers - many have said that the worst of their experience came when they tried to tell about the abuse within the faith community.

That was when they faced “the silence of the many.”

That was when the relational fabric of community, and often even of family, was torn asunder.

That was when faith itself was deemed a fraud.

Church after church has stood, not in solidarity with those who have been abused by clergy, but rather, with the accused minister-molesters. Often, the churches have stood with the ministers even when they admit their soul-murdering deeds, and sometimes even when they have been criminally convicted.

Church leaders have quietly allowed accused preacher-predators - even those with multiple accusations - to hop to new churches - and to do so repeatedly.⁴⁰

40 Crista Brown, “Clergy Sex Abuse and ‘the Silence of the Many,’” *Baptist News Global*, January 21, 2013, <https://baptistnews.com/article/clergy-sex-abuse-and-the-silence-of-the-many/>.

*“ Carry one another’s burdens; in this way
you will fulfill the law of Christ.”*

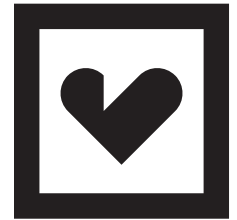
GALATIANS 6:2

“It is time for a prophetic imagining of what the church can and should be: a place of security, not shame, humbleness, not pride—a place where we follow the radical steps of the One who took our place, served us well, and sacrificed everything for us. If we simply follow the Golden Rule and do unto others who have been sexually harmed as we would prefer to be treated, revival can’t help but burst out.”⁴¹

MARY DEMUTH

Care

EQUIP YOUR CHURCH TO CARE FOR ABUSE SURVIVORS.



SECTION SUMMARY:

This section aims to help you begin to equip your church to care for abuse survivors. When abuse is discovered within a congregation, our immediate responses can either be helpful in showing care and love to those who have experienced abuse, or can be harmful and hurtful. Through the testimonies of survivors and the wisdom of experts, we can take the confusion and uncertainty out of the equation, thus enabling our congregations to respond appropriately and effectively when abuse comes to light.

FRAMING THE PROBLEM:

The statistics on sexual abuse are staggering. Because we have often been ignorant of the scope of survivors in our midst, we have easily believed the problem is “out there,” rather than in our own pews. This ignorance has left us with a lack of the theological and practical frameworks necessary for effectively and lovingly caring for survivors of abuse in our congregations. And because we have failed to care well, we have created a trust gap between our churches and survivors.

In response to recent investigative reporting on sexual abuse within the SBC, Dr. Danny Akin, president of Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary commented:

We have had reports recently of 700 documented child or sexual abuse instances. But how about all of the silent voices—all of the people who have been abused but haven't said anything, who are living with their pain? We need to become a haven of protection and of hope. So it is imperative that we as the Body of Christ step up and do the right thing, but also do the right thing in the right way.⁴²

PROTECTING PEOPLE NOT INSTITUTIONS

In the past, some SBC churches and leaders have been most concerned with protecting the reputation of their ministry and the church when abuse comes to light. Thus, they have failed to protect the survivors of sexual abuse themselves and failed to prevent future victims. David Pittman, a survivor of sexual abuse within the SBC, said that we need “to understand the difference between child protection and risk management, because [the SBC] seem to be more concerned with insurance policies than with the

souls of the children and the lives that could be damaged.”⁴³

A protective posture by any member of the SBC is inexcusable and unnecessary. Jesus does not need us to protect his reputation. As Russell Moore has said:

Jesus does not cover up sin within the temple of his presence. He brings everything hidden to light. We should too. When we downplay or cover over what has happened in the name of Jesus to those he loves we are not “protecting” Jesus' reputation. We are instead fighting Jesus himself.

Noted Christian psychologist Diane Langberg says it this way:

The church is called by God to tend his lambs. We are not called to protect our institutions nor do we protect the name of the God of truth by covering up sin and/or a crime. To do so is to “protect” the cancer—and cancer kills. We honor God by caring for the wounded and by dragging sin to the light and calling it by its right name.⁴⁴

Boz Tchividjian, former prosecutor, sex crimes expert, and founder of the ministry GRACE (Godly Response to Abuse in the Christian Environment), has seen this pattern time and time again. He writes:

Why do so many churches fail to do the right thing when they learn that one of their own has been accused of sexual abuse? All too often it's because the victimized are repeatedly overshadowed by the need to protect a “righteous” reputation. I'm afraid it's a rationale embraced by so many church leaders because it's convenient and sounds so “godly.” Here is an example of this distorted thought process:

⁴² Brad Hambrick, *Becoming a Church That Cares Well for The Abused* (Nashville, TN: B&H Publishing Group, 2019).

⁴³ Robert Downen, “Georgia Minister Dismissed over Abuse, but Victim Sees SBC Backtracking - Houston Chronicle.Com,” *Houston Chronicle*, March 5, 2019, <https://www.houstonchronicle.com/news/houston-texas/houston/article/Georgia-minister-dismissed-over-abuse-but-victim-13665319.php>.

⁴⁴ Diane Langberg, “Recommendations for Churches Dealing with Abuse,” accessed May 29, 2019, <http://www.dianelangberg.com/2019/02/recommendations-for-churches-dealing-with-abuse/>.

COMMON, DISTORTED THINKING

The reputation of the church will be damaged when the public learns that it employed an alleged child molester



a church whose reputation is damaged will lose members



a church that loses members is a church that loses income



a church that loses income is a church that will be required to tighten its budget, including reducing salaries and laying off staff



a dwindling church is a church that has less relevance in the community



a church that has less relevance in the community is a church that is failing to impact the world for Jesus

Tragically, this type of response to the evils of abuse destroys lives, emboldens offenders, and produces churches that are rotting at the core. There's nothing "righteous" about it.⁴⁵

When abuse is disclosed within our congregations, immediate action to protect the victim and stop the abuse must be taken. The survivor must be our top priority.

⁴⁵ Boz Tchividjian, "Righteous' Reputations of Churches That Do Not Care," GRACE, February 28, 2015, <https://www.netgrace.org/resources/righteous-reputations>

A MOM'S STORY. . . .

CAROL HOGUE MOTHER OF SEXUAL ABUSE SURVIVOR & CHILD ABUSE PREVENTION EXPERT

It was a Sunday in the spring of 2003. Our youngest son, Wesley, was weeks from his ninth birthday. Sundays were (and still are) busy days in our household as my husband, Marty, is a pastor.

Wesley and a friend had gone camping with a family friend and colleague of my husband's over the weekend. The boys got back from their camping trip in time for Sunday School. Wesley was tired and "out of sorts" that morning but I brushed it off to a fun but tiring camping trip. That evening I realized I was dealing with something more complicated than an over-tired child. As we were going through our normal bedtime routine, Wesley told me that Mr. Bob had touched him inappropriately – to use his words – he touched me where the bathing suit covers me. You've always told me no one should ever touch me there. I continued to listen as he shared more. I was careful not to ask leading questions. It was easy to do because I was having problems forming words of my own at the time. I was feeling a range of emotions: horror, anger, shock, betrayal, concern for Wesley, concern for my two older children, and concern for children in our church. The repercussions of this one man's actions seemed to have no end. This was not a normal Sunday evening!

Did I believe what my son was telling me? Absolutely. I got Wesley calmed down and immediately went to my older son's room and asked him directly if Mr. Bob had ever made him feel uncomfortable or touch him inappropriately. The answer was no. I asked my daughter the same question and received the same response. I then told my husband, Marty, what Wesley had shared with me. The situation was unthinkable, almost impossible to wrap our heads around, but we knew it was true.

Our first responsibility was to Wesley and our family – to access the resources that were needed to handle the situation appropriately to begin the healing process. We also felt a responsibility to our church family. It was important to shepherd them through this betrayal of trust. There were other victims who needed support and guidance.

You see, Mr. Bob was the church organist and a friend and encourager to all. He was not what he seemed to be. Abusers will often befriend and groom the child, their family, and entire organizations to gain access to children. Mr. Bob had done exactly that.

We were able to stop this man because we spoke up. We did not exercise the "privilege" of keeping our experience quiet. We knew nothing would change if we didn't talk about our experience. We made a choice to lead by example and provide a pattern for others dealing with child sexual abuse to model. We reported the abuse and worked through the legal system to seek justice. We accessed every service available to help Wesley begin the healing process, including the local Children's Advocacy Center, medical attention, and counseling services. It was a long journey comprised of forward steps and steps backwards. In time, the forward steps happened with increased frequency.

The trauma of child sexual abuse is real and had physical and emotional consequences for our son. He had difficulty concentrating and problems getting to sleep. There were multiple trips to the pediatrician for headaches, stomach aches, and asthma flare ups. The body will express your pain when you can't use your words. School was a challenge. When one person in a family suffers, it impacts everyone. An abuser's actions do not take place in isolation. We all felt the impact and had to work through the pain.

What got us through this difficult time? Our faith. And a lot of prayer. We had the love and support of family and friends. We had a deep and abiding faith in God and knew that he would not leave us or forsake us. We are now all stronger in our faith and committed to addressing the issue of child sexual abuse and to supporting those who have experienced it. All praise and glory belong to God.

AND DAD'S STORY. . . .

MARTY HOGUE FATHER OF SEXUAL ABUSE SURVIVOR & PASTOR OF FIRST BAPTIST CHURCH OF RAVENEL

As Pastor, on Sunday mornings I always got to church way ahead of most others. On this day, when Wesley got back from this particular camping trip, when he saw me he grabbed ahold of me tightly and would not let go. I couldn't even walk. I thought he was just happy to see me, not knowing the trauma he was going through.

That night, after the children were in bed, my wife, Carol, told me what Wesley had told her. I was flabbergasted. Shocked. Hurt. Angry. Bewildered. We decided I would talk with Wesley about it the next day. We chose the evening, since she was out of the house for the evening, and I would have Wesley all to myself. He and I were sitting on the bed. He was in my lap, his back to me. I asked him about what he had told his mom about what Bob had done. I was careful to not try to lead him in any way. I just let him tell me what he wanted to. I could hardly believe what I was hearing. I knew he would not make up something like this. But even if he had, I would err believing my son. When he finished, I hugged him and told him we would put a stop to it, and we would do all we could to keep Bob from ever being able to do this again.

I knew Bob and his wife were going on a cruise. I purposely stayed away from the church the next day so I would not have to see him. Then I contacted our Deacon leaders and asked for a meeting. In that meeting I laid out the story for them. With Bob away, we had some time to properly plan and respond. The deacons spoke with an attorney and got good legal counsel. Carol and I wanted to do everything the right way through the process. We had to take care of our family. I also had a church congregation that would be grieving through this process.

When Bob returned home two of our men met him at the door of the church and asked for his keys. He was terminated because we had no confidence in him. They had taken me out of the picture at that time, which was good.

Carol had reported the incident to the local police where the abuse had happened. A detective met with us at the Children's Advocacy Center, and he observed a trained counselor interview Wesley about the abuse. When it was over the detective said he would arrest Bob that day if he could find him. When the arrest was made Bob was surprised there was only one count, since there had been another boy on the trip as well. The other boy did not tell until long after our ordeal. This was on a Wednesday, so at Prayer Meeting I told the

folks present that Bob had been arrested and was in jail, and I gave no other details.

When Sunday came, I took time in the worship service to address the situation publicly. I wanted to assure folks that we were doing everything we could to make sure children were safe in our church. We hid nothing, except I did not say it was Wesley who had been involved. Many did not ever know who the child had been until months later.

Going through the legal process was long, tedious, and trying. There was never a trial. The solicitor worked out a plea agreement in the end, which just put Bob on probation. But he also had to be on the sex offenders list. In our meetings with the Solicitor we gave all the facts we could, as well as giving names of other children we knew Bob had been with and were possible victims. In the end, some of the others did come forward, and then Bob's family knew we were telling the truth.

During the legal process, which was a year and a half, we made sure every attorney and judicial official knew that we were not going away. We have never been afraid to stand up and take on anyone we had to. Though we were frustrated with the way the process went, we never wavered. We were at every meeting of any kind, even when we had been told we did not need to be there. We were not going away.

After the story about Bob had gotten out, I was amazed at how many other people told me stories and their feelings about Bob. He was crafty. Many, and even myself, had felt something wrong in the beginning, but gave him the benefit of the doubt. Over time he snookered us all. I also had many people tell me they had been abused as a child, and had never told anyone, or they were not believed.

It was like we turned on a faucet. *Since we were open about everything, other people felt empowered to tell their stories to us. We were suddenly thrust into a whole new ministry opportunity we never imagined or looked for. But since God had us there, we were going to embrace anyone and everything we had to. That ministry has not stopped. The dirty little secret is out. Other pastors have sought me out for help when they were faced with similar situations. Victims have come to us for counsel as well. I have learned more about child sexual abuse than I ever wanted to, but now we certainly see the reason.*

We are very fortunate. Very few victims tell, and certainly not on purpose. Wesley came to us freely. We are so thankful for that. God has led us through this so far, and we are still following him today as we continue this ministry opportunity passionately.

Have I forgiven Bob? Absolutely. I have prayed for his reconciliation. I have not seen or spoken with him since all of this. Maybe I will run into him someday. I want to tell him, "I forgive you." Forgiveness is much more empowering than anger.

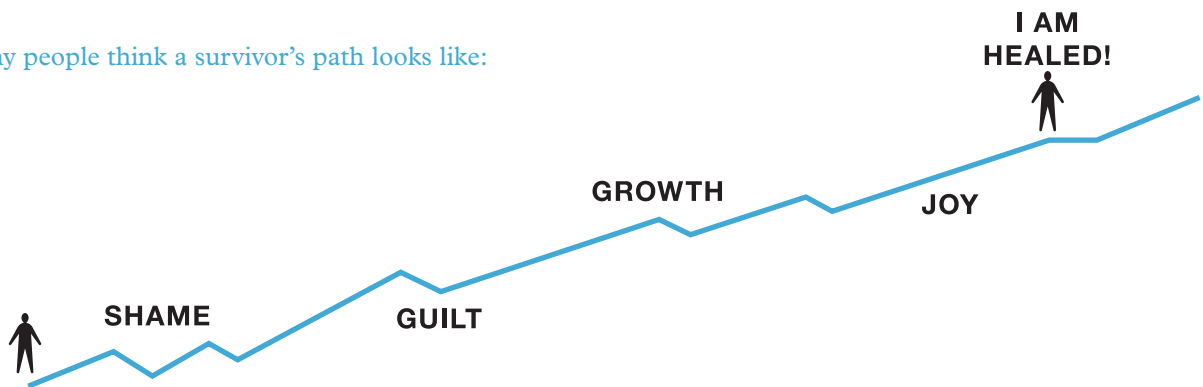
DISCLOSURE:

One of the hardest things a survivor of sexual assault ever does is say these words out loud: I have been a victim of sexual assault. People often do not share this because of shame and unwarranted guilt that plagues them. So when someone tells you this deeply personal part of their story, you must be ready to listen and care without any hint of accusation.

-Trillia Newbell, Sexual Abuse Survivor,
Advocate & Author

To be ready to respond well when a survivor of sexual violence discloses to you as a pastor or church leader, it is imperative we understand the magnitude of such a disclosure. Megan Lively, a survivor of sexual violence, drew a helpful diagram about what it felt like for her to disclose her sexual assault:⁴⁶

What many people think a survivor's path looks like:



The Realistic Version:



Disclosure is not straightforward and may come in many different forms. Often survivors are only beginning to process what happened to them and will not use words like “abuse” or “assault.” They may minimize or downplay what happened to them. It is crucial to patiently listen and respond that you believe their story.

Rachael Denhollander, survivor of sexual abuse, advocate, and attorney, explains:

In your role as a pastor, you are very likely to receive disclosures of abuse. This is because the victim desperately needs what you preach and promise. Surely, someone who understands holiness and sin, justice and perfect love, will understand the depth of the evil they have experienced.

This means that how you respond will become intertwined with the survivor's understanding of Christ and the gospel.

A victim who discloses to you is facing almost paralyzing fear and shame. The darkest, most intimate, private violations they never wanted anyone to see, they now have to speak out loud. They are also usually facing extreme self-doubt – many times victims have been so conditioned in the abuse that they question their own judgment, or think of abusive behaviors as “normal,” when they aren't normal at all. Many times the trauma has resulted in memory gaps and the victim is keenly aware of everything that can be used to discredit them. . . .

⁴⁶ Megan Lively, Twitter Post, April 8, 2019 9:43 a.m., <https://twitter.com/megannlively/status/1115294209085456384?s=11>.

The lies a victim hears in her own mind—it’s their fault, their shame, it’s not that bad, they are overreacting—are so loud that if your response in any way reflects those lies, it is absolutely crushing. They are unlikely to speak to you again, they may even

retract or soften their own allegations if your response indicates they are not safe and have not been believed. It often takes years for a victim to seek help after being crushed, even unintentionally.⁴⁷

ANGELA, COLLEGE ADMINISTRATOR, ON WHAT IT IS LIKE TO WALK ALONGSIDE SOMEONE WHO IS DISCLOSING ABUSE

I wish I remembered every time a person disclosed to me they were sexually abused. Sadly, as an educator, a family member, a church member and a community member, I know many people who have been violated. A couple months ago, I was inundated with the topic of abuse. It brought a fresh wave of grief over the sexual abuse of a family member. I picked up my phone to text a friend to not bear it alone, but put my phone down. I went through a list of five good friends who I didn’t text because they had all been sexually abused. I didn’t text the sixth friend because I realized she may have a story I’m unaware of. I know stories of friends, coworkers, students, and family members, but people in my life have stories I don’t know about. Statistically 25% of girls and 16% of boys are abused before they reach the age of 18. Picture scrolling through your Facebook friends and knowing every fifth person you see has been abused. If you have 1500 Facebook friends, 300 of them were abused. Three Hundred! If you have 500 Facebook friends, 100 were abused. That is too many! One friend being abused is too many.

Because we have friends who have been abused, we need to be prepared to hear their stories and to grieve with them if they choose to share. In my role as an educator, I was trained on what to do when people disclosed to me. I learned how to respond, but I was unprepared for close friends sharing about past abuse. I was unprepared for women at church sharing the personal and relational impact of abuse in their lives. Some of them shared casually, like I had always known. I hadn’t. Other friends shared as we discussed the MeToo Movement. “I know her so well. How did I not know?” Students I disciplined and would have done anything to protect, shared about their abuse. I’ve gotten the call from my brother to say his daughter was sexually abused. I’ve heard, “I’ve never told anyone this before.” These are not easy conversations. I’ve bombed some of these and had to go back and care for them. “Will you forgive me? I didn’t know what to say, so I didn’t say a whole lot. I’m really

thankful you told me. I just wanted to let you know I’m here to talk about it as little or as much as you would like to talk about it.”

I remember one particular student who chose to share with me about being raped. I was heartbroken. I don’t remember if I cried or not. Sometimes I’ve noticed that in those moments I can’t cry when I wish to cry, and I cry when I wish I was not crying. If sexual abuse is hard on my emotions as a friend, imagine the emotions involved for the survivor who is sharing about the abuse. I don’t remember why she chose to tell me. I don’t remember the day or the time. I do remember that she blamed herself for being sinned against. I remember conversations with her over the years, and I remember conversations with others where she was in my mind and heart.

The same week she told me, someone “casually” cracked a “joke” about rape. It wasn’t funny, and I let them know that. I teared up. The two men in the room told me I was uptight and overreacting. I wasn’t overreacting. I had ears to hear the reality and horror of their words. I imagined my friend being in the room and hearing those words. I was in the room with her when her peers discussed a situation involving sexual abuse in front of her. Some spoke wisely and some did not. Most were ignorant that a peer they respected and loved had experienced sexual violence and that their words were being taken to heart. I followed up with her. That hadn’t hit her like she had expected it to or like I had anticipated, but she thanked me for checking in. We talked when on different occasions she told different family members. After she got married, we had follow-up conversations about the fears and challenges she brought from the past into the marriage.

Care takes time and is costly, but the church has to be prepared to meet those impacted by sexual abuse with hope. We need to be prepared to walk with survivors for the long haul. I’m still learning how to do that. When we mess up and say the wrong thing, we can ask for forgiveness, tell them what we should have said. We can let them know we believe them, are there to listen when they want to talk, and will walk step by step, arm in arm with them through the ups and downs of healing.

⁴⁷ Hambrick, *Becoming a Church*, 17-19.

CARING WELL: HOW TO RESPOND WHEN ABUSE OCCURS

When a survivor discloses sexual abuse, whether it occurred within our church walls or outside, occurred yesterday or 30 years ago, we must be prepared to meet their disclosure with compassion and action. We must recognize that our primary responsibility in caring well for survivors of abuse is to place their protection and care as paramount above all other considerations in the process. Boz Tchividjian reminds us that, “Jesus was always on the side of the vulnerable and the wounded. . . . We must filter every decision with this question: *How does this decision protect and care for the alleged victim?*”⁴⁸

YOUR MINISTRY V. GOD’S MINISTRY, A TESTIMONY

A staff member at our church, Jared, made an inappropriate sexual advance toward another male staff member. The man who was touched inappropriately immediately reported the incident to the Lead Pastor. The Lead Pastor took the matter seriously and met with both men and their wives.

The relationship between the two staff members soon became bitter. Other staff members (who knew nothing about the incident) were confused. The Pastor believed the transgression was a one-time occurrence, trusted it would never happen again, and did not disclose the event. The Pastor placed restrictions upon Jared and required him to attend counseling, but because of the Pastor’s trusting nature, never followed up to make sure Jared was attending counseling. The victim and his family eventually moved to another church, and nothing was disclosed to the congregation.

A few years later, Jared and his family became close friends with a new staff member. While working together on a home project, Jared made a sexual advance toward the man. The staff member rejected the advance and immediately notified the Pastor of the incident. The Pastor unhesitatingly terminated Jared. He reported the incident to appropriate church leadership and informed the church of the termination. To protect the families of both the abuser and the victim, he did not disclose the reason for the termination. Eventually, the incident was revealed. The initial decision to not reveal the abuse brought physical, emotional, and spiritual suffering to the victims, the congregation, the Pastor, and the abuser’s family. The young man no longer serves in vocational ministry.

*The Pastor recently said, “**When abuse is discovered or uncovered in your ministry, remember that if it is “your” ministry, you will do all you can to preserve “your ministry” and either suppress or hide the abuse; but if it is HIS ministry you will humble yourself before God and the church and do ALL you can to obey Him, protect the church, and expose and expel the sin and abuse.**”*

To be able to respond quickly and effectively, we must develop a plan ahead of time for how we will respond when abuse occurs or is disclosed. Although each church context will need to develop appropriate protocols based on the size, location, and makeup of their congregations, here are some very important action items to consider as a starting point for churches developing a more comprehensive plan:

1. Develop a team of caregivers to walk alongside a survivor of abuse.

It is important to identify key staff members, church leaders, and professionals to include on a care team to walk alongside a survivor who has disclosed abuse. Each scenario and survivor will be different, so the team needed may be different for each survivor as well. Pastors, elders,

women’s ministry leaders, youth leaders, professional counselors, medical professionals, and attorneys are all examples of people who may need to be included on a team.

Here are three things to consider when developing care teams:

a. Consider the needs and agency of the survivor:

Each survivor has walked through a unique nightmare. Some may need immediate medical or mental health attention. Others may simply need a listening ear for the time being as they process what has happened

⁴⁸ Bayle J. Tchividjian, “Responding with Excellence to an Allegation of Sexual Abuse Within the Church,” *Currents in Theology and Mission* 45, no. 3 (2018): 42.

to them. Some may need help discerning their legal options for reporting and holding their perpetrator accountable. Others may be children where swift action is required to report the abuse and protect them from a dangerous situation.

But whatever actions need to be taken, be it in the case of child sexual abuse, adult sexual assault or domestic violence, it is imperative that we hear and respect the agency of the survivor. One survivor explained to our advisory group that upon her disclosure of rape on her SBC higher education campus, she was assigned a female counselor and told she must attend counseling with this specific counselor. Immediately in the session, the counselor asked the survivor questions that insinuated the rape was her fault. She dutifully attended the rest of the required counseling

sessions, but was heartbroken and confused. It took over a decade later before she re-entered professional counseling, and began to recognize and heal from her assault. Had she been empowered to decide when and where she would seek help from the very beginning, her story may have turned out very differently.

Additionally, it is crucial that we respond very delicately if the survivor is a child. Expressing anger or disbelief can lead to even more confusion and trauma, causing the child to shut down. Children need to know that we believe them and that we will do everything we can to keep them safe. Even saying things like, “Let me go investigate,” can signal to a child that we don’t believe them and they are not safe. Do not ask leading questions that could retraumatize the child, but instead ask open-ended questions like “Then what happened?”

A church elder once told me that if he received a disclosure of child sexual abuse, his first response would be to interview the alleged victim. His rationale was that he wanted to “be sure that the allegations are legitimate before reporting to the police and ruining the man’s reputation.” When asked what training he had to conduct a child forensic interview, the man was silent. When asked whether he wanted the responsibility to determine the validity of a very serious felony, he started to shrink back in his chair. I then asked whether he was prepared to violate mandated reporting laws. Fortunately, the elder got my point, changed his opinion, and acknowledged his need to learn more about child sexual abuse.⁴⁹

- Boz Tchividjian, GRACE ministry

b. Make sure to protect the survivor’s confidentiality:

Protecting the identity and story of the survivor is paramount. A survivor should be consulted about who they want to be told about their abuse. Although it is important to communicate with your congregation when abuse occurs, it is not necessary to identify the survivor or break their trust by divulging their identity. Include only those people who are necessary and have been welcomed by the survivor. Note that reporting obligations are constantly changing from state to state, even for adults. Quickly determine whether there is any reporting obligation that would necessitate a report that requires disclosure of the survivor’s identity to the authorities.

c. Include men and women in the process:

It is essential that the care team be made up of men AND women. As complementarians who believe

that men and women were equally created in God’s image but have been given unique roles and giftings, we recognize the importance of having both men and women on a care team. Both genders brings a unique and invaluable perspective.

2. Know your legal requirements for disclosure.

The church should not act as an investigative body in criminal matters. When abuse is disclosed and investigation is needed, local law enforcement should be called. In the *Becoming a Church that Cares Well for the Abused* curriculum, Attorney Samantha Kilpatrick explains:

In my experience, churches make mistakes when they try to handle everything in-house. This is problematic because churches are not equipped in all of the proficiencies needed in an abuse situation. Church leaders are often hesitant to get the “government”

⁴⁹ Tchividjian, “Responding with Excellence” 41.

involved - usually due to mistrust, coupled with a desire to handle abuse internally. Rather than mistrust, the church should view these authorities as a resource – God-ordained entities that have been put in place for the safety of those they serve and protect.⁵⁰

The nature of the abuse disclosed will determine what types of reports should be made and to what entities. Each state will have different requirements about reporting sexual abuse and harassment of adults and sexual abuse of minors.

Check your state’s reporting requirements through the national Child Welfare Information Gateway.⁵¹ In some states, members of certain professions, like counselors and teachers, are mandatory reporters of child abuse. In other states, all adults are mandatory reporters.

But as Russell Moore has said, “The Kingdom is a mandatory reporting state.” As Christ’s ambassadors, we are not to hide any evil or abuse. If you believe that child abuse has occurred you should report it to the appropriate authorities immediately.

If you are talking with *an adult who has been abused as a child*, a question that needs to be raised during this initial conversation is, “Does your abuser have any access to children at this time?” If the answer is “Yes,” then this constitutes “reasonable suspicion” of a child being abused and a report needs to be made. And as discussed above, reporting obligations are constantly changing from state

to state, even for adults. Churches should always carefully understand whether there is any reporting obligation that would necessitate a report.

When an adult discloses sexual violence, however, it is up to them to determine if they would like to report it to the authorities. It is important for you to advise them of their options and encourage them to report. Many times a perpetrator will be hurting or have the potential to hurt others and reporting is the best way to stop them from causing any more harm.

3. Get to know your local Child Advocacy Centers (CAC) and other agencies that work with survivors of abuse.

When you face a disclosure of sexual abuse, it is imperative that you utilize local law enforcement and appropriate professionals who are trained and prepared to handle such difficult situations.

Reaching out to and developing relationships with your local police department, mental health providers, department of child services, and domestic violence advocacy groups, among others, will provide you with the relationships you will need when a disclosure is made. Understanding the resources available to you in your community before a disclosure is made will help to take the pressure off in the midst of crisis, and allow you to call in experts to walk alongside the survivor and your church community, who will undoubtedly be in a state of shock and unequipped to best deal with the situation.

MEGAN LIVELY, SURVIVOR OF SEXUAL VIOLENCE

*When I shared my story with my pastor for the first time, he immediately told me the physical symptoms I was experiencing (complex trauma I didn't know I had at the time) were **no indication of the healthiness of my relationship with God**. He advised me to seek medical treatment immediately. Lack of sleep in the midst of a crisis can cause psychosis. My pastor didn't pretend praying and reading Scripture would help me through the physical symptoms of insomnia, anxiety, paranoia, etc.*

He was right.

My doctor was able to help. Many symptoms were curable without medication. For example- earplugs! My complex trauma was so bad I had to wear ear plugs for 2 weeks. My symptoms were similar to PTSD and my body/brain couldn't process even regular sounds. Pastors don't know these kinds of things. Medical professionals do.

⁵⁰ Hambrick, *Becoming a Church*, 26.

⁵¹ “Mandatory Reporters of Child Abuse and Neglect,” State Statutes Series (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Children’s Bureau, 2016), <https://www.childwelfare.gov/topics/systemwide/laws-policies/statutes/manda/>.

Child Advocacy Centers (CACs)

Your local Child Advocacy Center will be an invaluable resource to you when child abuse is discovered. CACs are designed to protect children from having to tell their traumatic stories of abuse over and over again. When a child makes a disclosure of abuse, they should be taken to a CAC where a trained interviewer will ask the right questions to record their story without retraumatizing the child. From there, a team that includes medical professionals, law enforcement, mental health, prosecution, child protective services, victim advocacy, and other professionals can use the recorded interview to make decisions about how to proceed and protect the child.

According to the National Children's Alliance:

To understand what a Children's Advocacy Center (CAC) is, you must understand what children face without one. Without a CAC, the child may end up having to tell the worst story of his or her life over and over again, to doctors, police officers, lawyers, therapists, investigators, judges, and others. They may have to talk about that traumatic experience in a police station where they think they might be in trouble, or may be asked the wrong questions by a well-meaning teacher or other adult that could hurt the case against the abuser.⁵²

4. Implement a policy for how to deal with the accused perpetrator, especially when minors are involved.

When determining a policy for how to deal with an accused perpetrator, it is crucial to remember our first priority is always to the survivor of abuse and protecting potential victims. Repeated studies have found that only 1-7% of allegations of child sexual abuse are false. Thus, when it comes to accusations involving children, it is wise for us to receive disclosures as credible until outside professionals demonstrate otherwise. Assuming innocence can endanger children.

Churches should consider immediate action in several areas when dealing with accusations of child sexual abuse, including access to church property and events during the deliberative process. Because a church is a place that

cares for children, our standard of access should be at least as strict as a school's standard would be during this period. In such a case, it may be wise to assign the accused a church leader to act as their liaison to the church. You can encourage them to listen to sermons online and send prayer requests through their liaison, but it is important to set strict and immediate boundaries to protect the survivors and the rest of the congregation.

Admittedly, deciding the exact parameters to put in place is complex. It is wise to have law enforcement and other local experts help you make these types of decisions.

5. Develop an after-care ministry for survivors of abuse or connect them with local resources.

Regardless if the sexual abuse disclosed is ongoing or happened many years ago, it is crucial to create a safe suggestion for survivors to heal within the context of the church. Psalm 91:4 tells us that "He will cover you with his feathers, and under his wings you will find refuge; his faithfulness will be your shield and rampart." As the body of Christ, we are to be that refuge.

Trillia Newbell writes:

When a congregant shares the deep wound of abuse, she will need to hear that she is clean and covered because of the blood of Jesus (Heb. 10:22). She will need to hear that Jesus was a man of sorrows and is acquainted with the deepest grief (Isa. 53:3). She will need to hear that she can draw near to the throne of grace and receive mercy and help in her time of need (Heb. 4:16). She'll need to be reminded that Jesus and God, the Father, love her.⁵³

For a large congregation that may mean bringing professional counselors on to your staff to help survivors and their families walk through abuse. For smaller congregations that may mean partnering with local nonprofits and agencies to develop relationships so that you can easily refer survivors to counseling as needed. Whatever the capacity of your church, make sure you have curated resources ahead of time to help your congregants deal with the long-term aftermath of sexual abuse.

52 National Children's Alliance, "How the CAC Model Works," 2014, <https://www.nationalchildrensalliance.org/cac-model/>.

53 Trillia Newbell, "6 Ways Pastors Can Care for Victims of Sexual Abuse," ERLC, February 13, 2019, <https://erlc.com/resource-library/articles/6-ways-pastors-can-care-for-victims-of-sexual-abuse>.

Additionally, caring well is not a quick process. The road to healing for survivors of sexual abuse is long and winding. They will need the support of their church body for many years to come. Your after-care ministry should be designed

to care well for a survivor for as long as is needed. Christ never grows weary of caring for His flock, and we as His hands and feet must follow suit.

MEGAN LIVELY, SURVIVOR OF SEXUAL VIOLENCE ON A SBC CAMPUS, DISCUSSING REACTIONS FROM MEN THAT WERE HELPFUL FOLLOWING HER ASSAULT:

"I want to be vocal about the huge amount of men that have handled my situation not only in the right way but gone above and beyond. For example:

Action- *One of my male professors responded immediately.*

Compassion- *Another male professor responded with kindness and love and support, over and over and over and continues to.*

Protection- *The male administrator in charge of student files has locked up and secured my file.*

Wisdom- *My pastor encouraged me with this- "you were forced to show mercy at a time where there should have been justice."*

None of these men expressed a huge amount of anger or got loud ever- I'm sure that was difficult as they learned some pretty bad things. Anger, even towards the man that hurt me, was an emotion my body couldn't emotionally handle at the time."

Becoming a Church that Cares Well for the Abused Curriculum

This year SBC President J.D. Greear directed a team of nine experts to develop a free, 12-lesson video series designed to equip the church on how to respond well to the initial report of abuse.⁵⁴ The *Becoming a Church that Cares Well for the Abused* curriculum brings together

top experts from various fields to help church leaders understand and implement the best practices for handling a variety of abuse scenarios at church, school, or ministry. We highly recommend that every church walk through this curriculum together.

⁵⁴ <https://churchcares.com/>

“Be shepherds of God’s flock that is under your care, watching over them-not because you must, but because you are willing, as God wants you to be; not pursuing dishonest gain, but eager to serve; not lording it over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock.”

1 PETER 5:2-3

“Every church has to be prepared. One victim is too many.”⁵⁵

DR. KEVIN EZELL, PRESIDENT, NAMB

“In the context of child abuse, then, it is not enough to refrain from beating, raping, or starving children, the obligation of parents and the church is to proactively protect children from abuse.”⁵⁶

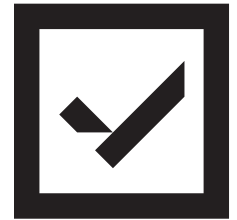
VICTOR VIETH

⁵⁵ Kevin Ezell, interview by Lindsay Nicolet, ERLC Office, February 18, 2019

⁵⁶ Veith, *On This Rock*, 49

Prepare

PREPARE YOUR CHURCH TO PREVENT ABUSE.



SECTION SUMMARY:

How can our churches better prepare to prevent abuse? Lack of understanding, complacency, confusion, and being overwhelmed can all contribute to unpreparedness. Because abusers often target churches, it is vital that we give our members the necessary tools to prevent any future abuse from occurring.

It is possible to prepare well. Whether we already have a plan in place or not, it is worth reexamining and listening to the wisdom of experts to ensure we are equipping our churches to protect the vulnerable from those who wish to prey upon them.

FRAMING THE PROBLEM:

When we consider the need to prepare our churches to prevent abuse, two problems frequently arise: 1. We don't know the best practices and strategies to implement, and 2. We become complacent, thinking what we're doing is working because abuse doesn't appear to be a problem. Unfortunately, this leads to a reactive rather than a proactive posture in which we do nothing, or very little, until it's too late.

The sexual abuse prevention experts at Ministry Safe contend that, "all ministries abhor child sexual abuse . . . and most *claim* to have 'zero-tolerance' for abuse, but there is a difference between opposition to abuse *in concept* and having preventative, proactive initiatives in place."⁵⁷

PREPARING WELL:

In order to make our churches safe from abuse, we must be proactive. Developing policies and procedures ahead of time, training and educating staff and volunteers, as well as partnering with sexual abuse prevention experts will set your church up well to be a safe haven for your community.

As Dr. Jason Allen, president of Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, has said, "It is impossible for a local church to take too seriously our mandate to protect our children."⁵⁸ It is up to the pastors, elders and lay leaders of a church to lead this charge.

Here are several action steps that you can take to begin to protect your church from predators who seek to prey on the vulnerable among you:

1. Equipping our staff and volunteers to understand and prevent abuse

The first step in preparing your church to prevent abuse before it occurs is to educate them on the signs of abuse and equip them to protect against it. The welcoming environment of most churches and their need to rely on volunteers to run their ministries makes many churches "soft targets" for abuse. If their staff and volunteers are not trained to prevent abuse, churches can and will be exploited by those seeking to abuse the vulnerable.

Congregations may be reticent to talk about body parts or sex within the church context, as these are often seen as private and uncomfortable topics. Yet it is critical to openly discuss these topics in appropriate settings, so that when a predator attempts to infiltrate the church or abuse does occur, the congregation has the knowledge to recognize it and the vocabulary to speak up about it.

⁵⁷ "Churches," MinistrySafe, 2019, <https://ministrysafe.com/programs/churches/>.

⁵⁸ Jason Allen and Lindsay Nicolet, ERLC Office, February 18, 2019.

WHY PREPARE, A TESTIMONY

Four years ago our youth pastor was arrested for sexual abuse of a 13-year-old female member of the youth group. For nearly one and a half years he groomed her, her family and friends, and church staff. Although he was married with a three-year-old daughter and expecting their second child when he was arrested, he managed to convince the girl he really loved her.

The discovery of his abuse changed many lives. Most notably, his abuse of a beautiful young girl has tainted her high school years. During her involvement at school, she has had to continuously submit legal documents, fight his request for parole (two years into his sentence), and prepare to face a new set of charges in another state. Each time the victim and her family thought they might be entering a season of peace, another related legal matter would surface.

Thankfully, the victim and her family are strong Christians. Their faith and determination to make it through this tragedy intact have held them together. The last few years have been trying for all members of their family. Christmas was overshadowed by an impending trial scheduled for January. The victim graduated from high school this May. Graduation has been dominated by the possibility of a trial in another state. At the ninth hour, a plea bargain was reached. If the agreement had not been reached, litigation would have begun two days after her high school graduation.

At the plea bargain hearing, the victim was forced to sit in the courtroom and face the man who robbed her of her youth and the last five years of her life. Reading her statement in front of her abuser took an enormous amount of courage: courage

to face him; courage to read aloud in front of a judge and courtroom full of people what her abuser coerced her to do; courage to dare to believe the judicial system would render justice; courage to dare to hope that one day her broken heart will heal, and she will be whole again; courage to believe this event will not forever cast a sinister shadow upon her life; courage to face the future.

How has this abuse impacted our church? The youth pastor was immediately terminated when his inappropriate behavior was discovered (long before we realized the extent of the abuse). We quickly turned to an outside agency for legal counsel and guidance in navigating this tragedy with our church family. We contracted with them to create and implement policies and procedures to help prevent abuse within our congregation.

We began to educate leaders, parents, and children on the topic of sexual abuse. We created a MinistrySafe team to screen everyone who works with minors in any capacity in our church. Are we perfect? No, but we realize that if we had received training before the abuse began, one of two things might have happened: (1) He would not have accepted a position at our church; or (2) People would have recognized the inappropriate behavior earlier and reported it. The abuse would have ended sooner. Education is the key to prevention.

Our policies have become such a part of the church's DNA that even our children recognize we have a governing set of safety policies and procedures by which we abide. They have asked in jest, "Is this Ministry Safe approved?" Strangely, for this children's minister's heart, their quip gives me assurance to know that our children are aware of our desire to protect them.

Training all staff and volunteers

It is imperative that all of your staff members and volunteers be required to attend training on how to prevent and identify sexual abuse. There are many excellent ministries and local agencies that are willing to come in to train your congregation. Although in-person training is recommended, as it allows participants to personally engage and ask questions during the training, there are many excellent online training resources as well.

The safety and protection of the children and vulnerable members of your congregation are well worth every penny and hour devoted to equipping your staff and volunteers.

On October 3-5, 2019, the ERLC and the Sexual Abuse Advisory Group will be hosting the Caring Well Conference in Dallas, Texas, to equip churches to confront the abuse crisis. This is a great opportunity for your church leaders and volunteers to come receive training from many of the nation's experts on preventing abuse.⁵⁹

Provide personal safety training for youth

Children's safety and protection should never rest on their shoulders. It is up to parents and adults in authority to protect them.

However, it is wise to give children tools to empower them in their own safety. Educating children on personal safety

⁵⁹ ERLC, "Caring Well," ERLC, 2019, <https://erlc.com/upcoming-events/2019-erlc-national-conference>.

diminishes an abuser’s power to keep the abuse hidden and to use misleading power dynamics and theology to confuse and trap their victims. As child safety expert Alison Feigh has said, “When a faith community decides that children will be empowered with non-fear based, good quality information about body safety, it sends a message to all that children are valued here.”⁶⁰

Personal safety training is not sex education. It instead teaches a child what is appropriate and inappropriate touching and behavior, and when and how they should tell an adult if it occurs. This not only protects a child from abuse within the church or parachurch setting, but it also prepares children to understand when they may be experiencing abuse in other settings—including at home or school. Additionally, it protects children from the spiritual harm that goes hand-in-hand with sexual abuse. When abusers seek to twist Scripture and theology to justify their abuse, children will have a framework to recognize these lies for what they are.

When implementing child safety training, it is wise to seek professional help to conduct the training or recommend curriculum. Alison Feigh explains,

Well-intentioned adults can perpetuate ineffective programming by focusing on unreliable myths or outdated research. For example, “stranger danger” is not taught as an effective prevention tool as most people who harm children are known to them. Moreover, children may have an image in their mind of what a stranger looks like that is different from that of an adult.⁶¹

Additionally, trained professionals can help you choose a curriculum that is both age appropriate and will not retraumatize children who may have experienced abuse.

Understanding signs of grooming

Understanding the signs of grooming, the process by which abusers use power in a relationship to gain potential victims’ trust and break down boundaries, is another essential step to stopping abuse before it begins. Sex offenders don’t just groom their victims, but also the parents and community around them in order to gain unfettered access to their victim.

Dan Powers,⁶² a social worker with over 30 years of expertise in the field of child abuse prevention, defines grooming this way:

Grooming is the process of manipulation by which an offender prepares a child, the adult in the child’s life, and the environment for the abuse. The goal of this manipulation is to gain access to the child, gain the child’s compliance, and keep the secret. Distinguishing between sexually motivated manipulation and normal adult/child interactions is difficult when people have no knowledge of sex offender dynamics. Most grooming behaviors are exposed retrospectively. Thus, better educating children, parents, and community members about possible predatory behaviors would be a positive step in protecting children.

As Powers points out, grooming can be hard to distinguish without adequate training. Those who seek to groom children and their communities are often expert manipulators conditioning those around them to trust them, and seeking to normalize behaviors that give them unsupervised access to their victims.

For example, Alison Feigh explains one method of grooming:

One of the many ways that grooming is used is the offender attempts to “define the reality” for both the targets and the extended community so that the abuser can control the perspectives of others. As one example, if the community is conditioned to be used to all of the children wrestling with the same one adult between services, the group perspective can quickly conclude that the behavior is nothing to worry about because it is what has always been done. If, instead, the adult is approached and reminded that through policy and through training, it has been decided that wrestling behavior is not a community norm, the reality remains defined by the community and not the individual acting out. If the adult means well, they can accept the correction as they move within the community norms. If the adult is attempting to lower inhibitions and test boundaries, they are reminded that this community holds each other accountable.⁶³

60 Alison Feigh, “In the Footsteps of Mary and Joseph: The Role of Adult and Child Education in the Prevention of Abuse,” *Currents in Theology and Mission* 45, no. 3 (July 2018): 23–26.

61 Ibid.

62 Children’s Advocacy Center of Collin County, “Our Leadership,” Children’s Advocacy Center of Collin County (blog), 2019, <https://www.caccollincounty.org/who-we-are/our-leadership/>.

63 Feigh, *In the Footsteps*.

Another potential sign of grooming occurs when a volunteer or staff member constantly pushes the boundaries of your set policies. Is there someone in your congregation who continually needs to be reminded of safety rules and continually pushes past or ignores them?

The best defenses against grooming are adequate training and rigid, enforced policies. When you have volunteers who are on alert for the signs of grooming, and safety policies that are applied across the board to everyone in your ministry without exception, it will be much more difficult for a predator to gain the access they need to exploit a victim.

2. Implement safety policies that protect and shepherd your congregation well.⁶⁴

“Policy is not something that is created and sits on a shelf. Policy is your guide and what you live by, not what you aspire to, but what you actually do – it is who you are.”

-Samantha Kilpatrick, attorney and former sexual abuse prosecutor

All churches should formulate policies for staff and volunteers to protect against abuse and should exercise

great care in doing so. Because churches often see policy as the avenue to protect from liability exposure, churches will often avoid policy because it could be used against them to establish a standard of care in legal proceedings. However, good policy in the area of child protection is meant to protect the individuals in your church, not just the church itself. In protecting individuals, you are in fact protecting the organization.

As God’s people we should prioritize protecting the vulnerable over risk management; people over the organization. *Liability should not be our motivation in creating and maintaining good child protection plans. We must change this mindset and understand that policy is a way to love and care for people well by keeping them safe from harm.* Making and following good policy is God-honoring and a way to steward the trust that our congregation and the community puts in us to be watchful and protective of those who may not be able to protect themselves.

Formulating good policies, requiring compliance with these policies, and responding well to violations of policy and disclosures of abuse are all ways that you protect and shepherd your congregation well.

SOUTHERN BAPTIST CHILDREN’S MINISTER, IMPLEMENTING SOUND POLICY, A TESTIMONY

While serving as children’s minister, a Mother’s Day Out (MDO) teacher disclosed that she had recently discovered her husband’s addiction to online pornography. The couple had been married for several years and had a four-year-old daughter. We met with the couple, provided professional counseling for them, and attempted to help them navigate through challenging days.

Two weeks later the teacher was back in the church office to report that the daughter had confessed that her father had sexually abused her. We called authorities and filed appropriate reports. The father was arrested and served time in prison.

The teacher remained on MDO staff. Several weeks later, at an in-home gathering of MDO teachers, the four-year-old victim was caught mimicking her abuse on another child. While we tried hard to keep matters quiet to protect both childhood victims, we had an obligation to place the child’s teachers on alert discreetly.

We learned that year that abuse comes in many forms and the consequences are always devastating for those involved. This incident reminded us of just how critical it is for the safety of all the children in our programs that we had trained volunteers, clear avenues for parents and children to disclose abuse, and firm safety policies in place for our teachers.

Form a committee to develop, review, and implement policies.

To start, no matter where you are in the process, it helps to have a committee that oversees the policy process. This committee should be made up of individuals who work with children and youth both inside and outside the church.

⁶⁴ The following section is not intended to be a comprehensive summary of policies to prevent abuse within a church, but a starting point for churches to build from.

No matter the size of your church, **the following types of people would be a helpful resource in formulating and reviewing policy:** children’s director, youth pastor, director of women’s ministry, a parent, a social worker, law enforcement, attorney, counselor, medical professional, and school teacher. Form a team that is adequate to cover multiple areas of expertise, share the workload, and maintain confidentiality, but keep it small enough that the group can get work accomplished and make meaningful steps towards creating a robust policy of protection.

Members of your team should understand abuse dynamics, have a strong desire to protect children, and make your church a safe place for those that are vulnerable, and be logical and practical in the way they seek to implement their ideas.⁶⁵

What to include in a safety policy:

When determining the specifics of policies, Victor Vieth recommends that at a minimum, churches meet the national standards promulgated by the Centers for Disease Control for youth-serving organizations.⁶⁶ He writes, “Indeed true Christian witness would shatter these minimal standards and also implement policies to address not only sexual abuse within the church but also sexual abuse in the home, as well as physical abuse, neglect, emotional abuse, and witnessing violence.”⁶⁷

Some important considerations for your policies include:

1. **Two-deep leadership:** Require at least two adults to be present when a child is present in all circumstances.
2. **“Known to Your Church” rule:** A volunteer should be “known to your church” for a specified period of time and by a specified number of leaders in order to be eligible to volunteer. This may prove challenging for churches who rely on a large number of volunteers to keep their ministries running, but it is crucial in deterring predators and fully vetting those who will interact with the vulnerable among us.
3. **Respect for a child’s privacy:** Ensure that children are guaranteed privacy when they are changing or going to the bathroom. This applies to giving them privacy from both adults and other children. Not only should privacy be maintained in the church setting but also at off-site activities like retreats and church camps.

4. **Open doors:** Have an open door policy in your church, unless a door is outfitted with a full window. This applies to ALL doors, not just doors in youth areas. This prevents private areas that could easily be utilized for abuse.
5. **No sexual jokes or behaviors allowed:** It is never appropriate to permit adults or other youth to make sexual jokes, innuendos, or behaviors. This is just one more avenue that predators can groom and begin to break down the defenses of the community.
6. **Guidelines for transportation:** It is important to establish guidelines for transportation to and from church events to prevent one-on-one settings and opportunities for perpetrators to gain access to victims under the guise of being “helpful” and offering rides.

Additionally, it is important for the policy team to think through a church’s hiring policies for staff and volunteers and policies for how to handle known sex offenders who want to attend the church.

3. Screening out potential risk

It is critical that churches have a methodical process of recruiting and screening employees and volunteers for suitability of service within child and youth serving ministries and compatibility with the church’s values and child protection policies. An informed process is important because a hurried frantic search and recruitment of employees and/or volunteers just to fill spots and have the right numbers can place children and youth in danger.

An unhurried methodical process of hiring and recruitment allows the church to properly vet, get to know, and get a feel for a person and whether he or she is a fit for a particular ministry. The process must include time and place for evaluation and potential discovery of red flags.

With this in mind, look at the hiring and recruitment process as an opportunity for the ministry to get to know the applicant, as well as the applicant to get acquainted with the ministry. Good policy and best practices around hiring and recruitment of employees and volunteers will lower risk and increase safety for children and youth within your church.⁶⁸

65 Forthcoming Samantha Kkilpatrick blog at ERLC.com

66 Janet Saul and Natalie C. Audage, “Preventing Child Sexual Abuse Within Youth-Serving Organizations: Getting Started on Policies and Procedures” (American Psychological Association, 2007), <https://doi.org/10.1037/e587062010-001>.

67 Victor I. Vieth, *On This Rock: A Call to Center the Christian Response to Child Abuse on The Life and Words of Jesus* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2018), 51.

68 Forthcoming blog from Samantha Kilpatrick on ERLC.com

The screening process for employees and volunteers for your church should include the following:

- Written application
- Background check
- Reference check
- Interview
- Orientation and Training

Written application

A written application allows you to gain a lot of information in an efficient manner. The application should have all of the standard types of questions, but there are key areas to cover in evaluating employees and volunteers from a child protection perspective. Some suggested questions your written application could include are as follows:

- Please list all experience you have working with children/youth. Include any paid positions, babysitting, volunteer positions, summer jobs, camps, or church work. Please provide start date, reason for leaving, position and responsibilities, supervisor, and contact information.
- Have you ever been suspended, asked to leave, or fired from a job? Please explain.
- Have you ever been suspended or expelled from high school or college? Please explain. (for youth & young adult workers)
- Have you ever been convicted of a crime? Please list dates and nature of offense.
- Have you ever been accused of hurting or abusing a child?
- Have you ever been asked to step down from a position of leadership in a church? Please explain time frame and details.
- Describe an area where you need improvement or is challenging for you in working with children or youth.
- What characteristics do you possess that make you a good fit for working with children/youth?

Background checks

Background checks are necessary, but are never a guarantee that a person is safe. Very few cases of sexual abuse are ever reported or prosecuted, so a background check is not likely to uncover potential bad actors unless they are in the very very small minority of perpetrators who have been caught, tried, convicted, and have not plead down to a lesser sentence. While it is necessary to complete a background check on all staff and volunteers, it should *never* be your only screening mechanism.

FAYE SCOTT, 24-YEAR VETERAN CHILDREN'S MINISTER, FIRST BAPTIST NEW ORLEANS

Careful deliberation and preparation of policies and procedures designed to safeguard our children has proven invaluable as we recruit, plan, and implement activities within our church. Every volunteer who works with minors through our church (off-campus activities included) is required to participate in a safety certification process which involves viewing videos related to the prevention of child sexual abuse in the church, completion of a volunteer application form and references, and a criminal background check. The process is repeated every three years for volunteers and lay leaders alike.

Enforcing the policies has allowed leadership to block individuals with questionable backgrounds from serving with minors. Clearly stated policies allowed these decisions to be made objectively rather than subjectively. Each person undergoes the same process and the same set of standards is applied to each applicant. The process helps to provide a buffer between our children and those desiring to harm them. Having policies in place ahead of time ensures that a plan can be safely carried out by persons whom we know are prepared.

A few months ago, a man began to visit our church, and we soon learned that he was a Tier III registered sex offender, the most serious level of offender in our state. This discovery caused a great deal of discussion (and even division) among church leadership. At the time, our church did not have an official policy regarding registered sex offenders' attendance at church. After nearly two weeks of researching information, seeking counsel, and informing the congregation of his presence, we drafted a policy. The policy will be beneficial the next time we are faced with this situation. Had the policy been in place earlier, a considerable amount of time, energy, and difficult conversations would have been avoided.

Planning ahead for various scenarios, enforcing the policies, and oversight of the system requires commitment from the entire congregation. Although enforcement of such policies is costly in time and money, no value can be placed upon the life of a child. The church must be a safe place where individuals can be trusted. Trust is a critical component of salvation. The bottom line is this: As ministry leaders, we must earn the trust of those in our care so that we can earn the right to share the gospel message of Jesus Christ.

Veteran law enforcement agent and background check expert Mike McCarty⁶⁹ highlights the dangers that churches who rely solely on simple background checks face:

“Churches and ministries are flooded with cheap background check solutions from a highly unregulated background screening industry. There is no such thing as a single, complete database of criminal records, not even the FBI. Sexual predators are highly motivated and the current church and ministry approach to background screening is no match. Protecting children and the ministry requires a complex approach that includes training, comprehensive background checks, reference checks and the development and implementation of security teams.”

When choosing a background check provider, it is important to choose an option that includes the following:

- a social security number verification to validate identity, other names, and develop address history⁷⁰
- a multi-state or national criminal database search and county criminal search⁷¹
- the scope of the search should be as far back as the records allow
- real-time arrest alerts, which notify you anytime that the person is arrested in the future.

Conducting a comprehensive background check on each staff member and volunteer may require a small increase in your budget for this area, but it will be well worth the investment.

Johnson Ferry Baptist Church, a Southern Baptist congregation, is one church that has decided to make this investment. Their director of Human Resources, Jill Kearney, explains their decision:

“Johnson Ferry takes seriously protecting our minors, elderly, employees, volunteers and the church as a whole. In an effort to do ministry with excellence, which is a core value of our church, we decided to dig deeper in our background check process, inevitably increasing costs. If this helps us to protect our minors and the elderly from abuse of any kind, we view this as being a good steward of what the Lord has blessed us with”

Reference checks

Reference checks are a must when screening for employees and volunteers. A reference is not helpful unless you follow

through and actually talk to the references. Reference checks should always occur prior to hiring, not as a check the box step.

View the list of employers, volunteer supervisors, and personal references as data points that should be pursued in order to verify the person is who they say they are and does not have any red flags from previous employment or ministry work. Employment references should be verified for accuracy and job performance. Other churches or ministries where the applicant has served should be contacted regarding those positions and the individual’s interaction with children and youth.

Some questions that may be informative interviewing references are as follows:

- Please verify the position, responsibilities, and start and end date of the applicant.
- What was your relationship with the applicant, and how long did you know him/her?
- Please describe the applicant’s interaction with children/youth?
- Please describe the applicant’s interaction with supervisors and those in authority?
- What strengths does the applicant possess in working with children/youth?
- What weaknesses or challenges did the applicant have in working with children/youth?
- Do you have any hesitancy in recommending this applicant to work with children/youth?
- Would your organization have this person back in the future?

Interviews

An interview is a time to be face to face with the applicant or potential volunteer. Direct questions about prior jobs and interaction with children and youth are helpful. It is also a time for you to educate the applicant about your church/ministry area and your vision and priority for child protection.

In educating about your church, review your child protection policies during the interview and ask if the person has any questions or concerns with following the policies. The applicant’s reaction may be a helpful indicator of the level of buy-in to child protection.

69 Safe Hiring Solutions- Background Screening, “Leadership Team,” accessed May 29, 2019, <https://www.safehiringsolutions.com/leadership-team>.

70 Safe Hiring Solutions, “10 Things to Know Before Selecting a Background Screening Firm,” accessed May 29, 2019, <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/59f5c9bf0abd0485b36a0340/t/5a0dceccc83025ee41493006/1510854348832/10+things+to+know+before+you+hire+a+background+screening+firm.pdf>.

71 Ibid.

By addressing abuse and child protection policies with applicants in the recruiting and interviewing process, your church is sending a clear message about the value you place on children and your priority of keeping them safe from harm. At the same time, you are learning more about the applicant and whether he or she is a good fit from the perspective of beliefs, background, safety, experience, demeanor, and responsibility.

Orientation/Training

The final step in the hiring and recruitment process

is orientation and training of your new volunteers and employees regarding your ministry area and child protection policy. While this occurs after a decision to hire or invitation for volunteer to serve, solid training on policy and abuse dynamics must happen early and on a regular basis throughout one's employment or service to the ministry. *Many liability carriers require training on a one to three year basis*, but consistent training even in shorter modules will reinforce the church's priority of abuse prevention and child safety.

ABUSERS ALLOWED TO CONTINUE IN MINISTRY, A TESTIMONY

Robert was a young pastor with a promising career in a growing church. The pastor's first child was less than one month old when his wife discovered his addiction to online pornography. She was shocked and insisted on his resignation from the pulpit. The pastor confided in key leaders in the church and was quickly terminated.

Robert begged forgiveness from his wife, and they immediately began counseling. He confessed to the counselor and his wife that throughout his adolescence he had repeatedly abused a young teenage girl. The girl's parents had learned of the abuse but made a choice to not file charges. He also admitted that he often had similar thoughts about other young girls.

When the couple initially left the ministry and relocated, they got involved in a church that ministered to them, and their new pastor chose to mentor Robert. Although the pastor of their new church received a full disclosure regarding the abuse, he allowed Robert to engage in ministry (including the praise team) actively. One day a young minor girl on the praise team received a text message from Robert offering to give her private music lessons. The head pastor was advised of the solicitation, but no action was taken.

Robert's wife has provided the pastor with written documentation of Robert's confession to child sexual abuse and professional evaluations by specialists regarding his propensity for child sexual abuse, yet Robert continues to actively serve in a leadership position in the church.

4. Create a Safety Team

If your church does not already have a team dedicated to proactively protecting the physical safety of your church, it is time to create one. The team should be tasked with patrolling the grounds during church events, ensuring the safety of the congregation, helping to manage vulnerable areas within your church.

Members of the team should include both male and females and be made up of church members who may be law enforcement, medical personnel, social workers, or other trusted members who are able to help protect the congregation. Team members should be background

checked and screened thoroughly, trained in sexual abuse prevention and agree to adhere to all set policies.

Although the team should be prepared to respond to a safety issue, its main function is to deter predators of all types by being a visible but welcoming presence in the church.

Scott Reger, a Special Agent with the Iowa Major Crime Unit and an elder in his SBC congregation, has spent much of his career dealing with sexual abuse cases. He has helped his congregation develop a safety team to protect the church from outside intruders and predators from

within. He believes that safety teams are most effective when they are not a police type presence within the building, but instead are integrated into the Welcome Team and are part of the ministry vision of the church. Reger writes:

Safety teams should not be a privatized police force for our modern churches. In fact, the best safety teams are part of the Welcome Team. They should have smiles on their faces and be some of the friendliest and most welcoming people in the church. One of the best preventative measures of abuse is simply to let someone know that you are aware of who they are (and that means meeting people, introducing yourself to them and having them introduce themselves to you) and that you are aware of them. At the same time, safety team members are also the guardians and first responders for the church. They must be ready to respond at all times against threats to the church or its patrons and likewise, they must also be ready to respond to calls for help.

Future Steps for Southern Baptists

Since the Sexual Abuse Advisory Group was formed following the 2018 SBC annual meeting, there has been positive momentum indicating that Southern Baptist churches and entities are taking seriously the call to become churches who root out and confront abuse within their communities and care well for survivors of abuse.

In a first step forward, SBC President J.D. Greear, when the Executive Committee convened in February, announced 10 calls to action for Southern Baptists based on initial recommendations from the Sexual Abuse Advisory Group.⁷² One of the calls to action was a unified effort by the six SBC seminaries, all of the state conventions, and all the associational leaders to affirm three separate “Statement of Principles” documents.

This collective response was unprecedented and “signaled a collective commitment to address abuse at every organizational level of the SBC.”⁷³

The Southern Baptist of Texas Convention and the Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission assisted Bart Barber, pastor of First Baptist Church in Farmersville, and others in drafting Bill HB 4345 in Texas that would “give immunity from civil liability to churches or other non-profits that in good faith report allegations of sexual abuse to an individual’s current or prospective employer”⁷⁴ Representative Scott Sanford explained this bill seeks to “end the silence that allows predators to move between organizations.”⁷⁵ The bill was unanimously passed by the Texas Senate.

More recently, two Southern Baptist entities have adopted statements of their intent to support efforts to root out and prevent sexual abuse. The Southern Baptist Conference of Associational Leaders (SBCAL) and the Officers of the SBC Fellowship of State Executives released a document entitled “Encouragements to Associations, State Conventions, and Churches Regarding Abuse of Minors,” stating their intention “to support associations, state conventions and churches in the prevention of sexual abuse and to encourage the protection of minors.”⁷⁶

Also, on May 30, the Executive Committee announced it will consider a proposal designating an SBC committee to inquire into reports that a Southern Baptist church is not acting in harmony with the Convention’s statement of faith. This committee could begin the process of removing from the SBC a church that fails to oppose sexual abuse and properly care for its victims. President J.D. Greear explained the need for this recommendation, saying, “It has become clear the SBC needs a clearer process for responding to abuse, as well as qualified individuals speaking into the process who ensure that

72 Phillip Bethancourt, “10 Calls to Action for Southern Baptists on Sexual Abuse,” ERLC, February 19, 2019, <https://erlc.com/resource-library/articles/10-calls-to-action-for-southern-baptists-on-sexual-abuse>.

73 See Phillip Bethancourt, “10 Calls to Action for Southern Baptists on Sexual Abuse,” ERLC, February 19, 2019, <https://erlc.com/resource-library/articles/10-calls-to-action-for-southern-baptists-on-sexual-abuse>.; Staff, “Southern Baptist Convention Seminaries: Statement of Principles on Abuse,” ERLC, February 18, 2019, <https://erlc.com/resource-library/statements/southern-baptist-convention-seminaries-statement-of-principles-on-abuse>.; Staff, “SBC State Conventions: Statement of Principles on Abuse,” ERLC, February 18, 2019, <https://erlc.com/resource-library/statements/southern-baptist-state-conventions-statement-of-principles-on-abuse>.; Staff, “Southern Baptist Conference of Associational Leaders: Statement of Principles on Abuse,” ERLC, February 18, 2019, <https://erlc.com/resource-library/statements/southern-baptist-conference-of-associational-leaders-statement-of-principles>.

74 Bob Allen, “Proposed Texas Bill Would Shield Churches That Report Sexual Abuse from Lawsuits,” Baptist News Global, April 2, 2019, <https://baptistnews.com/article/proposed-texas-bill-would-shield-churches-that-report-sexual-abuse-from-lawsuits/>.

75 Ibid.

76 “SBC Entities Encourage Protection of Minors,” Baptist & Reflector, May 15, 2019, <https://baptistandreflector.org/sbc-entities-encourage-protection-of-minors/>.

we are a convention of churches who adhere to the legal standards of reporting abuse.”⁷⁷ Russell Moore, president of the ERLC, said, “No one policy in a church or in a denomination is enough, but this is a monumental advance, as part of a larger, concerted effort at education, equipping, and response.”⁷⁸ This recommendation is movement forward in caring for the abused as it is “a process that fosters transparency and accountability while operating within the unique polity of the SBC.”⁷⁹

Additionally, the development of the *Becoming a Church that Cares Well for the Abused Curriculum* is a significant step in helping to equip the church on how to respond well to the initial report of abuse. This 12-lesson video series will be released in July 2019, and will provide practical steps for how to walk alongside survivors as they confront and heal from their abuse.

While steps have been made, and many Southern Baptist entities and leaders have linked arms and committed to confronting the evils of sexual abuse, we recognize that words and statements are never enough. The church body should be encouraged by the steps taken so far, but should not rest until promises are turned into actions and lives are restored.

⁷⁷ Diana Chandler, “SBC EC May Revise Sex Abuse Prevention Proposal,” Baptist Press, accessed June 3, 2019, <http://www.bpnews.net/53010/sbc-ec-may-revise-sex-abuse-prevention-proposal>.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Phillip Bethancourt, “A Guide to Understanding the Credentials Committee Proposal,” ERLC, May 30, 2019, <https://erlc.com/resource-library/articles/a-guide-to-understanding-the-credentials-committee-proposal>.



THE CARING WELL CHALLENGE

In June 2019, the Sexual Abuse Advisory Group will be launching the Caring Well Challenge, a unified call to action on the sexual abuse crisis in the Southern Baptist Convention. The goal is to equip churches to be safe for survivors and safe from abuse. It provides churches with an adaptable, and attainable pathway to immediately enhance their engagement on abuse. We urge all Southern Baptist churches to commit to taking the challenge over the next year as an important next step in addressing the crisis of abuse. Beginning at the SBC annual meeting in Birmingham, churches will commit to the challenge and find resources for the initiative at caringwell.com.

The Caring Well Challenge is designed for any church to be able to implement. It encourages the entire denomination to take a stand against sexual abuse together as one body.

Each church that takes the challenge would commit to work through the following eight steps:



1. COMMIT

Commit to the Caring Well Challenge



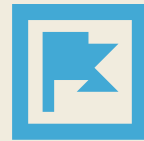
2. BUILD

Build a Caring Well Team to lead your church's effort



3. LAUNCH

Launch the Caring Well Challenge



4. TRAIN

Train your team at the 2019 ERLC Caring Well Conference



5. CARE

Equip leaders through Becoming a Church that Cares Well for the Abused



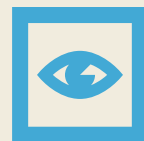
6. PREPARE

Enhance policies, procedures, and practices related to abuse



7. SHARE

Dedicate Sunday services on May 3rd, 2020, to address abuse



8. REFLECT

Reflect on the Caring Well Challenge at the 2020 SBC Annual Meeting

 Visit caringwell.com to learn more and sign up.

CONCLUSION

“He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away. He who was seated on the throne said, “I am making everything new!” Then he said, “Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true.”

REVELATION 21:4-5

“Our history isn’t our future.”

MEGAN LIVELY, SURVIVOR OF SEXUAL VIOLENCE

Beth Moore, Survivor of Childhood Sexual Abuse, Advocate & Author

*I would change my story in a heartbeat, but I get to say to them, “You know what? I know Jesus heals.”... **People go, “Why don’t you heal up?” I have healed up, but a whole lot of women have not.** And as long as they haven’t, as long as there’s an 8-year-old little girl out there, an 8-year-old little boy that has been abused and needs some hope, I’m not going to act like it didn’t happen to me. I’m gonna go, “You know what? I’ve been through it too. And I know you can make it on Jesus. I know you can.”⁸⁰*

For far too long boys, girls, men and women have lined our SBC pews silently bearing the scars of sexual abuse. Most church leaders were unaware of the suffering of their most vulnerable, some knew and turned a blind eye, and a few leaders perpetrated the evil themselves.

But Christ Jesus, our Savior, saw their suffering. He did not turn a blind eye. He has declared victory over evil itself (Rom. 16:20).

And now it is time for our Southern Baptist Convention to repent of any ignorance or indifference, turn from our inaction or insufficient action, and turn toward the sacrificial model of our Savior. We must cast aside our pride and our own agendas and open our eyes to the suffering amongst us, vowing anew to protect and walk with them.

We know the One who is the Light who shines in the darkness (John 8:12). Now it is time for us, His church, to go and do the same.

⁸⁰ Beth Moore, What I’ve Learned in My Years as a Parent, interview by Russell Moore, ERLC National Conference, October 3, 2018, <https://erlc.com/resource-library/event-messages/what-ive-learned-in-my-years-as-a-parent>.



www.caringwell.com

