CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE IN MINISTRY CONTEXTS
Understanding the Risk

By Gregory Love & Kimberlee Norris

Child sexual abuse risk in ministry contexts cannot be ignored. This statement implies child protection *has* been ignored in the past, and for some ministries, sadly, this is true. For most ministries, however, the challenge is not ignoring the problem - *it is an ignorance of the problem*. Most ministries are doing *something*, but not doing the *right thing*.

Church Executive and MinistrySafe have teamed up to address the risk of child sexual abuse in ministry contexts by creating a series of articles aimed at equipping ministry leaders. The goal is to provide analysis and guidance such that ministry leaders can understand the risk, properly prepare to meet the risk, and effectively address the risk with preventative protocols. Sexual abuse attorneys Gregory Love and Kimberlee Norris, the founders and directors of MinistrySafe, have over 50 years combined legal experience addressing child sexual abuse issues impacting ministries and secular organizations across North America.

Prevention starts with understanding: how does child sexual abuse risk unfold in ministry contexts?

WE CANNOT REDUCE A RISK WE DO NOT UNDERSTAND
What does your church do to protect children from sexual abuse?
This question jump-starts any discussion about child sexual abuse risk and preparation.

The majority of ministry leaders can answer this question, and typically reference these practices or efforts:
 -Criminal background checks
 -Child check-in system
 -Policies
 -Two adult rule
 -Six-month member rule
 -Video cameras
 -Police officer on site (uniformed or plain clothes)

This list, however, is minimally helpful in protecting children from the dozens of abusers featured in media reports within the past five years – from Memphis to Scottsdale to Dallas to New Orleans. Yet the Church continues to double-down on the 'list' as if it were the solution to the problem. Continued reliance on this list will result in negative headlines for the *next 25 years*. As civil trial attorneys who deal with *standards of care*, we stand over scores of 'train wrecks' in

Christ-based environments. In nearly all cases, the ministry in the media cross-hairs employed a variation of the practices listed above. At core, the problem is that these practices or efforts do not address the *real* risk.

BUILDING THE RIGHT FENCE
In any discussion related to child sexual abuse prevention, the concept of a *fence* is a good starting point.

A fence is a barrier designed to protect something of value, and the type of fence built is driven by what the fence is meant to keep *out.* To protect a garden from your neighbor's livestock, for example, your fence may require metal stakes and barbed wire.
While a barbed wire fence effectively addresses one risk (livestock), it's absolutely worthless related to another (rabbits).

In general, *churches are building the wrong fence.* Ministries are building perfectly functional barbed wire fences, and the rabbits are destroying our gardens. Compounding the problem, churches construct the wrong fence *and believe the problem is solved.*

To effectively address the risk of child sexual abuse, church leaders must understand offender behavior, then *build the right fence*.

UNDERSTANDING THE RISK
To build the right fence, a church's efforts must correspond to actual risk. To properly protect children in ministry programs, church leaders must understand how the risk unfolds.

Livestock vs. Rabbits
To better understand this risk, ministry leaders must be aware of two types of sexual abusers, the *abduction offender* (livestock) and *preferential offender* (rabbit).

Abduction Offender
The abduction offender often has little or no relationship to the child or the child's family; simply sees an opportunity to snatch a child and does so. The public sees the story on the news, and the outcome is generally awful. Considering the broad waterfront of child sexual abuse risk, the abduction offender represents 4-5% of the problem. The abduction offender is best known due to the reality of missing child reporting, but represents only a fraction of the problem.

Preferential Offender
The preferential offender may be male or female and may have an age-appropriate partner, but *prefers* a child as a sexual partner. Not just any child; typically, a child of a particular gender and age range. The preferential offender has no visual profile – he or she looks like you and me. Jerry Sandusky and Larry Nassar, for example, are preferential offenders; neither was identified as a risk by a visual profile. On the broad waterfront of child sexual abuse risk, the preferential offender represents over 90% of the problem. This explains a commonly accepted statistic: that 90% of children are victimized by someone they know and trust.

The preferential offender *is* the problem in ministry contexts, but ministry protocols related to child sexual abuse risk are designed to protect children from the abduction offender—the *snatch and grab* scenarios. The preferential offender has no visual profile. Instead, this offender must be recognized by his or her *behavior*. These behaviors are known as the offender's 'grooming process'.

THE GROOMING PROCESS

The Grooming Process of the preferential offender prepares a child victim – and the child's gatekeepers – for inappropriate sexual behavior. This process includes patterns of identifiable behavior, including:
 -Gaining access to children within an age and gender of preference
 -Selecting a specific child (or children)
 -Introducing nudity and sexual touch
 -Keeping the child quiet to ensure secrecy.

The grooming process of the preferential offender involves two significant efforts: *grooming the child* and *grooming the gatekeepers*.

Grooming the Child

Grooming of the child will vary depending on the age, gender and situation of the child. When the targeted child is a teen male, common grooming behaviors will include pornography, alcohol, marijuana and horseplay. If the targeted child is a teen girl, common grooming behaviors will include texting, social media communication and sexual discussion. If the targeted child is under eight years of age, common grooming behaviors will include tickling and forms of playful touch, gravitating toward places of isolation.

Grooming the Gatekeeper

A gatekeeper is anyone responsible for protecting a child: parents, teachers, youth workers, coaches or babysitters. The preferential offender works hard to appear helpful, trustworthy and responsible to a child's gatekeepers. Why? Molesters are looking for *trusted time alone* to groom a child for sexual touch. When an individual appears helpful, trustworthy and responsible, gatekeepers tasked to protect children are disarmed.

Both Sandusky and Nassar were effective at grooming children and gatekeepers. Neither had past criminal convictions, both would have passed a criminal background check, and neither had a visual profile. Conversely, if program leaders had understood the grooming process of the preferential offender, both Sandusky and Nassar would have been identified as a serious risk several years – and several victims – earlier.

WHAT NOW?

For any church leader, the first step in addressing child sexual abuse risk is self-critical analysis. Ministry leaders must shake off the delusion that this is an insignificant issue or someone else's problem, or that this risk is effectively addressed by criminal background checks and a child check-in system. Conservative studies indicate that less than 10% of sexual abusers will encounter the criminal justice system, *ever*. The child check-in system will not negate or identify the behaviors of the preferential offender. By clearly understanding the *actual* risk, ministry

leaders are better prepared to protect children in their care. Sadly, most ministries continue to build the wrong fence. For the sake of our children, it's time to get to work building the right fence.

The next article will explore the grooming process of the preferential offender, and describe an effective safety system addressing the risk of child sexual abuse in ministry programs – the foundational elements of *the right fence*.

Is there any good news in this? Yes. The offender's grooming process is predictable ... and what is predictable is *preventable.*

WHY 'THE LIST' FAILS
Criminal Background Checks- *No Silver Bullet*
Less than 10% of sexual abusers will encounter the criminal justice system, *ever.*
More than 90% of abusers have no record to find; and they know it. Further, *getting and understanding* criminal records that *do* exist continues to challenge ministry leaders.

Child Check-In Systems
The effectiveness of a child check-in system can only be evaluated when ministry leaders understand the difference between the abduction offender and the preferential offender. A ministry's child check-in system may be effective related to the abduction offender, who constitutes 4-5% of the risk. Generally, a child check-in system is useless as it relates to the preferential offender – who represents over 90% of the risk. Further, the child check-in system is completely ineffective in reducing the risk of peer-to-peer sexual abuse.

Policies & Procedures
Policies are what you DO, not what you SAY you do. Policies & procedures are the written expression of what IS and IS NOT appropriate behavior in a ministry program. If a ministry leader does not understand the preferential offender, it is unlikely that he or she is familiar with the *grooming process* of the preferential offender. To effectively address child sexual abuse risk, policies must clearly identify and prohibit grooming behaviors within the ministry program. If a ministry leader does not understand behaviors that should be prohibited, policies are unlikely to be effective.

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