



CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE & STUDENT MINISTRY High Risk and Low Barriers

*By Gregory Love & Kimberlee Norris
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Youth Leader Arrested for Sexual Abuse of 14-Year-Old Girl screams the front page headline of a major metropolitan newspaper – *yet again*. As detectives investigated, several other teen girls came forward with additional allegations. Parents of students in the program expressed hurt, anger and bewilderment: how could this happen in a *ministry* program?

While it's incomprehensible *why* offenders sexually abuse children, it's easy to understand why offenders seek access to children where the barriers of protection are lowest. Sadly, this is often the Church, which commonly lacks any *real* understanding of sexual abuse risk. Further, the Church provides a welcoming environment offering forgiveness and welcome, saying "Come as you are" and "No perfect people here", unintentionally creating easy access to children for offenders.

Question: Within the Church, which ministry program carries a higher risk for sexual abuse?
Answer: *Student Ministry.*

**Why is sexual abuse risk higher in Student Ministry?
Why are Student Ministers unprepared to address this risk?
What tools are available to resource Student Ministries to reduce this risk?**

Sexual abuse risk is real for churches of all sizes. Not all churches offer *classic* Children's Ministry and Student Ministry, and there is no one-size-fits-all Student Ministry program. Sexual abuse risk unfolds in varying contexts based on size, staffing and program offerings.

DEMOGRAPHICS

Research reveals that the majority of churches are comprised of less than 100 individuals – *small* churches. In a small church (up to 200 worshippers), ministry is commonly bifurcated into 'church for adults' and 'church for kids' with a parent volunteer or part-time employee gathering kids of all ages into a room where age-appropriate lessons or activities are provided. In other small church settings, a staff member or volunteer provides music and lessons for children under a certain age. Programming for children and youth in a small church tends to vary depending upon the demographic served, ministry priority, facility and budget.

A mid-sized church (200 to 600 worshippers) generally provides some form of Children's Ministry and Student Ministry, often overseen by a full or part-time Student Minister or Pastor. Programming often relies heavily on church volunteers.

A large church (600+ worshippers) often has a dedicated Children's Minister and Student Minister who oversee distinct programs. In a large church, both Children's Ministry and Student Ministry depend heavily on volunteer workers and leaders.

WHY SEXUAL ABUSE RISK IS HIGHER IN STUDENT MINISTRY

Equipped with an understanding of the *offender's grooming process*, this becomes clear. *Preferential* Offenders, those who *prefer* a child (or youth) as a sexual partner, tend to gravitate toward child-serving programs that serve children who are within their *age and gender of preference*. If a Preferential Offender is serving within a ministry program, he or she is there for the purpose of accessing children or youth. Within the program, the offender looks for opportunities to create *trusted time alone* with the targeted child. Student Ministry, with less structure and greater opportunity for *trusted time alone*, presents a higher risk environment. In Student Ministry, the reality of 'contact work' and relational ministry, often overtly encouraged by the Church, create opportunities for access.

A Dangerous Combination: Trust and Access

The Preferential Offender, as opposed to the Abduction Offender (giving rise to 'snatch and grab' offenses), represents a real and significant risk to the Church. The Preferential Offender, seeking access to a specific age and gender of child, quickly identifies the Church as an obvious target, because the Church has gathered the children or youth *for the Offender*. Having targeted a child-serving program or Church, the Preferential Offender engages in the *grooming process*, the process whereby the Offender (1) gains access to children within his age and gender of preference; (2) selects one or more children; (3) introduces nudity and sexual touch while isolating the child; and then (4) keeps the child silent.

The Preferential Offender looks for opportunities to serve in a position of trust, where he or she may create *trusted time alone*, with a targeted child. For the Preferential Offender, Student Ministry provides a *soft target*, easily exploited.

Children's Ministry v. Student Ministry

Children's ministry – even in a mid-sized church – is usually structured, with dedicated room(s), a child check-in system, cameras, limited access, and predictable schedule and location. Additionally, there is no need for electronic communication with younger children (texting, Facebook, etc.), and programming is typically provided on Sunday morning on the church campus.

Student ministry, by contrast, is intentionally relaxed in order to create an inviting environment, often meets in less structured or off-campus locations, includes 'cool' activities mid-week or on weekends and involves small group Bible study and discipleship, which may meet in private homes. Given the developmental stage of students, issues related to purity, intimacy and sexuality are regular topics of discussion. In some churches, student ministry participants attend conferences, mission trips, beach and ski trips, retreats and other activities requiring overnight accommodations, changing of clothes and unstructured free time. Because students in middle school and high school are immersed in online culture, the use of electronic communication and

social media present countless ways to interact *privately* with a student. Any of these elements make Student Ministry an attractive target for the offender; in combination the risk is compounded. In this environment, the offender *grooms the gatekeepers*, winning the trust of parents and church leaders alike, providing opportunities for *trusted time alone*, thereby enabling sexual abuse.

Peer-to-Peer Sexual Abuse

Peer Sexual Abuse, children or youth sexually molesting other children, remains largely unknown to Student Ministry leadership and presents another significant risk in ministry environments.

STUDENT MINISTERS REMAIN UNPREPARED

Church leaders – and parents – typically place responsibility on the Student Minister to protect students from sexual abuse. Unfortunately, Student Ministers commonly lack the appropriate background, education and experience to understand child sexual abuse, sexual abusers and sexual abuse risk.

Student Ministers – Who Are They

When a church is ‘mid-sized’, it often hires a dedicated Student Minister. Depending on the church’s size and budget, the Student Minister may have begun as a volunteer or part-time employee until a need was felt for a full-time paid position. The Student Minister may be female, but tends to be male. The common demographics of the typical Student Minister reinforce a series of inherent weaknesses.

The Student Minister is commonly mid-twenties and single or newly married.

At this stage in life, the Student Minister has typically received no training related to sexual abuse risk. In some cases, the Student Minister *experienced* sexual abuse as a child, in which case his or her understanding is often limited to the context of that personal experience.

The Student Minister is a college graduate and considering (or beginning) a seminary degree.

Very few undergraduate programs offer information or training related to sexual abuse risk. Currently, proactive seminaries require Sexual Abuse Awareness Training in new-student orientation or before graduation, but few seminaries offer comprehensive instruction concerning sexual abuse risk in the context of Student Ministry.

The Student Minister is typically overwhelmed.

Because the Church is rarely pro-active in staffing, the Student Minister is usually overwhelmed with administration, teaching, meeting parents, recruiting volunteers, leading Bible study and small groups, planning activities and managing a budget. Expecting the Student Minister – a young adult with no training in sexual abuse risk – to proactively investigate and evaluate preventative resources is unreasonable at best. In addition, as the low man on the staff roster, the Student Minister seldom has real authority to implement policy change within the church.

The Student Minister has a short tenure in the role.

In the Church, the role of Student Minister is often viewed as a stair-step position. The Student Minister may accept the position in early- or mid-twenties; by thirty, the Student Minister is married, has one or more children, and ready for a position working with populations other than

teens. As a result, the role of Student Minister has regular turnover of 4 to 6 years – even shorter in Middle School contexts.

ADDRESSING THE CHALLENGE

Clearly, sexual abuse prevention is a church-wide issue, not limited to Student Ministry. Church leaders bear the responsibility of setting child safety priorities and developing a framework for sexual abuse prevention in *all* ministry endeavors, including Student Ministry. It is not the Student Minister’s responsibility, given the inherent challenges described above, to do so *alone*. Regardless, many churches expect the Children’s Minister and Student Minister to simply ‘figure it out’ for their respective programs.

What tools are available to resource Student Ministries to reduce this risk?

We can’t address a risk that we don’t understand. All ministry leaders – including Student Ministers – must receive excellent training related to sexual abuse risk.

This begs the question:

Where do Student Ministers tend to get training, and are current avenues of instruction adequate?

Are Student Ministers currently receiving excellent training concerning sexual abuse risk from seminaries or Student Ministry conferences?

Seminaries/Christian Colleges

Many seminaries and Christian colleges are currently utilizing Sexual Abuse Awareness Training as an element of orientation or requirement for graduation. Awareness Training provides an excellent first step, but deeper instruction is necessary to effectively protect children in the Church.

A handful of seminaries and Christian colleges are currently offering or requiring MinistrySafe Institute, seminary-level material aimed at vocational ministry professionals who desire educational resources at a deeper, more comprehensive level. Created to equip ministry leaders with an understanding of the issues and how to best navigate through them, MinistrySafe Institute provides instruction encompassing these topics:

- Understanding Sexual Abuse in Ministry Contexts
- Creating an Effective Safety System
- Skillful Screening Processes and Training
- Abuse Reporting Requirements
- Allegations of Sexual Abuse – Preparation and Response Plan
- Changes in the law
- Models of Care – Child Victim and Adult Survivor

Conferences and Seminars

For professional development and continuing education, ministry leaders attend conferences, seminars and workshops.

Student Ministers rarely attend conferences, workshops or seminars dedicated to child sexual abuse prevention. They do, however, attend national and regional Student Ministry conferences,

including [Orange](#), [D6](#), [Summit](#), [Legacy Youth Leadership](#), [Drive Conference](#), [Global Leadership Summit](#), [National Youth Workers Convention](#) (Youth Specialties) and more.

Few conferences offer breakout sessions related to sexual abuse risk and risk management resources – notwithstanding the reality that Student Ministry creates a high risk environment, Fewer still have offered main-stage presentations on the importance of child protection and abuse prevention. In the past, various presentations have focused on *Sex Trafficking* ... but not *Sexual Abuse*. These topics address two *significantly* distinct issues, and sexual abuse is a risk occurring *within* Student Ministry.

In short, where this risk is concerned, Student Ministers are not currently well-resourced by conferences.

Online Resources – MinistrySafe and DYM

MinistrySafe delivers comprehensive Safety System elements and instruction for ministry programs, including Student Ministry. Download Youth Ministry (DYM) provides an online marketplace designed to give Student Ministers access to a wide range of resources, including Bible studies, skits, icebreaker activities, themes, music playlists and much more.

MinistrySafe has coordinated with DYM to provide state-of-art-resources through the DYM Student Ministry marketplace. This synthesis of resources was supported by invaluable guidance from The Forge Associates, a consulting organization made up of former Student Ministry professionals.

Camp Organizations

Christian camp organizations are ahead of the curve in providing effective child protection training. Thousands of college students serve as camp counselors every summer, and many of these camp counselors serve local churches in middle school and high school ministry. As camp counselors, these young men and women undergo screening, complete training, learn state reporting requirements and comply with defined policies addressing sexual abuse risk. Camps with proactive child protection training, screening protocols and policy expressions include, among others: Sky Ranch, WinShape, Glorieta, Trout Lake, Twin Lakes, Camp Eagle, Camp Jon Marc, and Ridgecrest.

At Sky Ranch, we provide a safe and fun experience for thousands of children each year. We are committed to the enrichment of children AND our staff. We invest a great deal into our staff to shape them as young adults. Equipping them with information about sexual abuse helps protect our campers ... but also helps our staff grow into the roles they will fill in the Kingdom as ministry leaders and parents.

John Morgan, Sky Ranch Vice President of Ministry Programs

In 2014, the Christian Camp and Conference Association (CCCA) made a concerted effort to prioritize sexual abuse resources and training for member camps in North America. Other organizations offering camp programming, such as Christ In Youth (CIY), Reformed Youth Ministry (RYM) and Youth with a Mission (YWAM) are deeply committed to protecting children from sexual abuse.

The equipping provided by Christian camps remains *truly* invaluable, providing an introduction to sexual abuse risk and child protection.

RAISING THE BAR IN STUDENT MINISTRY

Child sexual abuse risk can be a minefield for churches and ministry organizations, and ministry leaders will never *accidentally* get this right. Instead, Churches must *raise the bar* in Student Ministry, where intrinsic risk is higher. Raising the bar requires access to excellent training, resources and guidance, but begins with prioritizing the need.

Kimberlee Norris and Gregory Love are partners in the Fort Worth, Texas law firm of Love & Norris [<https://www.lovenorris.com>] and founders of MinistrySafe [<https://ministrysafe.com>], providing child sexual abuse expertise to ministries worldwide. After representing victims of child sexual abuse for more than two decades, Love and Norris saw recurring, predictable patterns in predatory behavior. MinistrySafe grew out of their desire to place proactive tools into the hands of ministry professionals. Love and Norris teach the only graduate-level course on Preventing Sexual Abuse in Ministry Contexts as Visiting Faculty at Dallas Theological Seminary.