FREE WEBINAR • JUNE 15 AT 1 PM CDT
Why Juneteenth Should Matter to the Church
Reflecting on Faith, Hope, & Freedom
REGISTER NOW
CT • Our Daily Bread

SHARE
TWEET
SHARE
LINK
EMAIL
PRINT

Recommended

Why We Love 'The Chosen' So Much
LUKE BURGIS

My Boss Is a Jewish Construction Worker
JORDAN K. MONSON

A Year After the Election, Trump's Effect on Evangelical Churches Lingers
DAVID ROACH

Why Don't We Sing Justice Songs in Worship?
MICHAEL J. RHODES

In Plain Prayer: Why Missionary Families Are Showing Love to Haiti Kidnappers
DONALD B. KRAYBILL AND STEVEN M. NOLT

DISCIPLESHIP

Sexual Abuse Issues in the Church; Raising the Bar

In recent years, our society has begun to better understand the widespread problem of child sexual abuse.

BY GREGORY LOVE AND KIMBERLEE NORRIS

In recent years, our society has begun to better understand the widespread problem of child sexual abuse. Conservative studies indicate that one out of three girls and one out of seven boys will be sexually abused before reaching 18 years of age, regardless of religious or socio-economic demographic.

Law enforcement sources estimate nearly 60 million survivors of childhood sexual abuse are living in America today.

Sexual abuse is not limited to any racial, ethnic, or socio-economic class. It is no respecter of any religious denomination or creed. Sexual abuse can happen anywhere.

Parents allow their children to participate in ministry programs for the positive experience of Christian growth, fellowship, and spiritual mentoring. Obviously, this positive experience is shattered if a child is sexually abused while participating. Sexual abuse should never happen in ministry, but the church and Christian ministries have experienced its devastating impact. Families and lives have been devastated, churches of all denominations have been sued, ministries destroyed.

Unfortunately, the problem is growing.

In the last three years, an average of 23 new articles each day have appeared in secular media sources revealing sexual abuse allegations arising in *Protestant* churches in the United States. Protestant denominations have been tempted to call sexual abuse a "Catholic problem"; this is simply not true. Within the past eight years, verdicts, judgments, or settlements exceeding hundreds of millions of dollars have been levied against Protestant churches for sexual abuse allegations arising from children participating in ministry programs.

Current Issue
MAY/JUNE 2022 GIVE A GIFT

The Scottish Complementarian Who Teach Women to Preach
As for Me and My Household, We'll Resist Mammon
Secularism Doesn't Have to Be Bad
READ THIS ISSUE
Like 58K Follow 24.5K followers

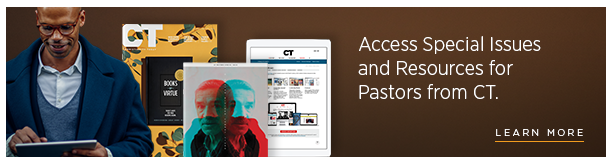
Free Newsletters
Get the best from CT Pastors editors, delivered straight to your inbox.
Email Address SIGN UP
This form is protected by reCAPTCHA and the Google Privacy Policy and Terms of Service apply.
MORE NEWSLETTERS

Recommended Resources

Urgent Care: Responding to Trauma
BCLStore.com

The church and its children are increasingly endangered by sexual predators whose opportunity to ensnare children elsewhere is growing smaller, while the church opens its doors to anyone. Sexual abusers looking for access to children will gravitate to activities and organizations where there are fewer protective measures in place. Secular organizations have responded to this inevitable truth by implementing policies and training to reduce risk. Many churches, however, have done little, because ministries fail to recognize the risks or are laboring under the misconception "it won't happen here."

Standards of care embraced by public entities with children's programming have risen dramatically in the past 10 years. Secular organizations such as the Boy Scouts, Girl Scouts, Boy's and Girl's Clubs, theme parks, swimming pools, and children's clubs have grown far more sophisticated in screening employees and volunteers, creating policies and procedures that protect children from abuse, and implementing effective oversight and program accountability. These measures protect staff members and volunteers from false allegations, while safeguarding children involved in programming.



As public awareness and secular standards of care rise, sexual predators are looking for access to children in places where protections are few: *the church*.

While volunteers often undergo less scrutiny than paid staff, a 1996 study in Hammar's *Church Law and Tax Report* found that half of all sexual misconduct offences in churches were committed by volunteer workers. Paid staff constituted 30 percent of the cases, and the remaining 20 percent were committed by other children in the congregation (peer-to-peer abuse).

"Peer-to-peer" abuse, children abusing other children, has risen dramatically within the past decade. Criminal prosecutors report nearly 300 percent increase in reports of peer-to-peer abuse in the past five years. Children often repeat behavior they have experienced or see, so that even very young children may participate in sexual activity without understanding it. In one large metropolitan congregation, a young boy who had been abused by a family member fondled a young girl on the church playground, *while children's ministry staff members sat nearby*.

The church needs protection, but few churches are effectively addressing this risk.

Solutions Start with Awareness

Because the problem of sexual abuse is growing, legislative bodies are raising the bar. In Texas, for example, the "Youth Camp Act" became effective June 1, 2006. This Act requires "sexual abuse awareness training" from an approved provider for all camp staff and volunteers, covering specific topics, with an examination over the material. The Act's definition of "youth camp" includes any day camp, defined broadly so as to arguably include every VBS in the state of Texas. Whether or not a church or ministry has a camp licensed by the state of Texas, the requirements laid out in this piece of legislation represent a yardstick measuring "reasonable behavior" for entities participating in activities described by the Act.

Many who survey legislation related to child sexual abuse believe this to be the first wave of a legislative trend, with other states following suit with similar legislation. Because of proactive victim's groups who lobby lawmakers (such as SNAP), state laws will continue to be fluid in creating specific requirements for organizational policies, training, and record keeping. From a legal standpoint, this Act shapes the standard of care for children's activities throughout the state of Texas, and these standards will inevitably influence legislation in other states.

Unlike other personal injury law shaped by tort reform, legal requirements in sexual abuse cases are *enlarging* legal rights, rather than shrinking them. In most states, lawmakers are increasing statutes of limitation, (the legal time limits within which suit must be filed in civil suits), and many include language allowing lawsuits against organizations for sexual abuse when a victim understands that the damage he or she has suffered is related to the sexual abuse experienced. In other words, suit may be filed a very long time later, with no specific age limit or time cut-off.

What is the church to do?

The single most important step a church can take? *Train your people to understand the problem*. The creation of safe environments for children's programming requires training. When staff members and volunteers have an awareness of the basic characteristics of a sexual abuser, the process by which an abuser picks and prepares a child for abuse, and key indicators of child sexual abuse, they are better equipped to recognize and prevent abuse in church programs.

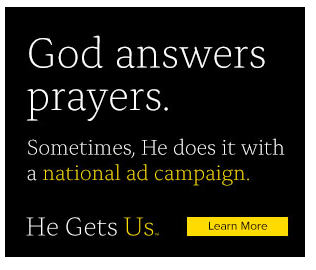
Misconceptions Lead to a False Sense of Security
Church leadership often has misconceptions about sexual abuse, and methods of adequately addressing this risk.

These misconceptions may include:

- We don't have a problem
- We're okay; we do criminal background checks
- We're okay; we have policies ... we got them off the internet
- We're okay; we have cameras and a child check-in system
- We really can't afford to do anything

"We Don't Have a Problem"

In our current cultural climate, no church should assume that child sexual abuse will not occur within its congregation. Conservative studies confirm that child sexual abuse is a problem of epidemic proportion. As secular entities respond by taking more aggressive measures to reduce risk, [1] the church gets "left behind," and sexual predators go to where safety measures are non-existent or less apparent.



"We do Criminal Background Checks"

Many lay people see the criminal background check as a "silver bullet"—as if a computerized background check system is sufficient to prevent sexual abuse. This is a big error.

Checking for criminal convictions *alone* will not protect children in church programs. Statistically, less than 10 percent of sexual offenders are *ever* criminally prosecuted, because children do not report abuse until years later, if ever. Many offenders are never caught, or are allowed to simply leave a prior volunteer or staff position, rather than face prosecution for molesting a child. It happens, even in the church. As a result, approximately 90 percent of offenders have no criminal record to check.

A criminal background check simply reveals whether a person has been involved in the criminal justice system; it does *not* vouch for or verify whether a person is safe, trustworthy, or appropriate to work with children.

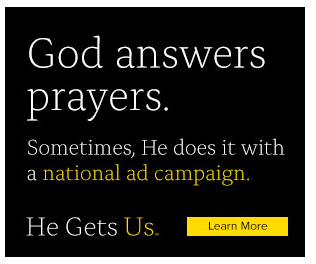
Some churches have begun to screen applicants using state database resources meant to reveal criminal convictions. Unfortunately, computerized database searches are searching only a fraction of available criminal records, as many state databases are incomplete, and the majority of services check only the *current county* of an applicant's residence.

Remember, only 10 percent of sexual abusers will *ever* encounter the criminal justice system. Approximately 90 percent of sexual abusers have no criminal record relating to child sexual abuse—and they know it. Even if a church employed a criminal background check system that effectively located *every* brush with the law, 90 percent of sexual abusers would go unidentified.

"We Have Policies ... We Got Them Off the Internet"

It is common for churches to have something written down as policy, and equally common for staff members and volunteers to have little familiarity with these policies. As a result, the "policy" isn't being followed. Legally, the only thing worse than having no written policy is creating written policy that isn't followed. Policies are what you *do*, not what you *say* you do.

In some instances, an abuse allegation will occur in a church, and the children's director or youth pastor will be tasked to "find us some policies and procedures." He or she will call other churches for a sample, search for policies on the internet, or both. Often, the task is "completed" when the church gets "something" in writing, changing the names in the document to fit the church or ministry.



Unfortunately, the church winds up with a glove that doesn't fit; patchwork policies that are not tailored to specific ministry programming. The resulting document is filed somewhere, largely forgotten, until requested by someone. Regrettably, the next request for the document may be in the course of litigation.

"We Have Cameras and/or a Child-Tag System"

Child-tag systems, which ensure no one takes a child without the appropriate tag, can be valuable in preventing child snatching. Camera systems, working properly, may provide additional surveillance and an effective deterrent, but are limited to the specific area of installation. A church may get hours of footage of an abuser grooming a child for abuse, but this is unhelpful if the person reviewing tapes is unable to recognize grooming behavior as such. [2] Additionally, as children move to middle school and high school ministry, programming becomes less structured and contained, and more geared to contact work outside the church facility.

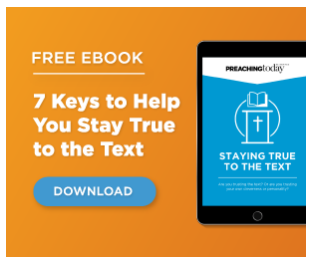
Child-tag and surveillance systems alone will not adequately address the risk of child sexual abuse, because 90 percent of child sexual abuse is perpetrated by a person *known and trusted by the child*. Less than 10 percent of sexual abuse involves "stranger danger" or a snatched child.

"We Really Can't Afford It"

In reality, the reverse is true; the church simply cannot afford to ignore this issue. The cost of ignorance and denial are high, both in damage to children and financial liability. Ministering to young people is close to the heart of Jesus Christ (Mark 10:13–16). Children are the future of the church, and the church must properly appreciate and prioritize child safety.

An Effective Church Safety System
An effective safety system for the church should include the following components. Each of these components is valuable as *part* of a program, but cannot create a safe environment *standing alone*.

1. Sexual abuse awareness training (for staff members and volunteers).
2. Skillful screening training (for key screening/hiring personnel).
3. Appropriate criminal background checks.
4. Tailored policies and procedures (for Children's Ministry, Student Ministry, and ministry to vulnerable adult populations [3]).
5. Effective monitoring and oversight of all ministry programs involving children or vulnerable adults.



- Sexual Abuse Awareness Training
  The introduction of *anychange* in a ministry program may meet resistance from those asked to comply—especially changes that place new responsibilities on volunteers. If volunteers and staff members are first *trained*, new policies make sense, and many emotional barriers to change are replaced by a desire to be part of a system that protects those who cannot easily protect themselves—our children.

- Skillful Screening Training
  Together with appropriate criminal background checks, *effective screening* can encourage a sexual predator to "self-select out" of church staff or volunteer pools. Skillful screening measures deter or prevent a molester from having access to children through ministry programs. Put differently, background checks and screening are the measures designed to "keep the wolf out of the sheep pen."

  Skillful screening requires training of intake coordinators and interviewers, providing them with information and tools to recognize high-risk responses on applications, reference forms, or during an interview. Risk indicators might disqualify an applicant for service or employment, or simply instigate follow-up questions to rule out risk. This training allows hiring personnel to assess whether a prospective employee or volunteer is high-risk for children's programming.

  An applicant with inappropriate sexual motives carries with him or her various indicators and life patterns that help identify him or her as one who may not be appropriate for ministry with children or youth. Every church should be well versed in these indicators, but few are.

- Appropriate Criminal Background Checks
  An appropriate criminal background check, coupled with skillful screening, can be critical in preventing an abuser from assuming the church's mantle of authority as a trusted ministry employee or volunteer. For each church staff member or volunteer, the depth of a criminal background check should be determined by the extent of direct contact with children, and degree of authority within a ministry activity or program. For a higher level employee, or a volunteer or staff member with extensive contact with children or students, a more comprehensive criminal background check may be advisable. A comprehensive check may include an actual county-by-county record search.

- Tailored Policies and Procedures
  Every church should operate within carefully tailored policies and procedures that balance the mission of the ministry with the risks inherent in children's programming. For every program or activity, inherent risks must be evaluated and addressed in policies and procedures that reduce the likelihood of harm to children. At the same time, policy manuals can't look like *War and Peace*, or volunteers will *not* read them. (As an example, don't make your student ministry volunteers read the diapering policy. Create specific handbooks for specific ministry application.)

  Policies and procedures cobbled together from various sources are rarely effective, because "patchwork" policies are seldom tailored to a ministry's activities, physical facilities, and specific programming risks.

- Monitoring and Oversight
  Effective monitoring and oversight is imperative to the success of any safety system. Checks and balances include monitoring for adequate supervision of activities and programs, unscheduled drop-ins on programming, and performance reviews that include safety system compliance.

The Church—Left Behind?
Sexual predators will gravitate to activities and organizations where fewer protective measures are in place. The church should lead the way in promoting a protective culture that is easily seen, obvious to parent and offender alike.

Every church has a vested interest in proactively communicating:

- this church is serious about protecting children;
- this church will require applications and interviews;
- this church will screen effectively;
- this church will train all staff members and volunteers to recognize and report grooming behavior;
- this church will skillfully monitor the behavior of staff members, volunteers, and children; and
- this church will expect ALL staff and volunteers to understand and comply with policies and procedures designed to prevent abuse.

When a pro-active church communicates effectively, sexual offenders will opt out of church programming, because "it's just too hard here."

Perhaps someday offender access will be "too hard" in every church.

Gregory Love and Kimberlee Norris are partners at the law firm of Love & Norris, a national sexual abuse litigation practice, representing hundreds of victims of child sexual abuse. In addition, the firm represents secular organizations and ministries in legal matters related to child safety and sexual abuse.

Love and Norris also serve as directors of MinistrySafe, a consulting organization designed to help churches and Christian ministries understand and address child safety risks related to sexual abuse. For additional information, see www.MinistrySafe.com.

[1] Secular entities are responding to changes in the law, additions to licensure requirements, requests by insurers and in response to having endured litigation and payouts.

[2] In litigation, video footage can actually be harmful to a church if it clearly depicts grooming behavior and the person in charge of video review did nothing in response.

[3] Vulnerable adult populations would include disabled adults, elderly persons, and any other persons who might be vulnerable to abuse, such as Alzheimer's patients. Church programs aimed at providing services to these individuals should have appropriate safety systems in place.

Copyright © 2008 Promiseland.

Reply on Twitter Join the conversation on Facebook

TAGS: Children | Conflict | Counseling | Family | Sex and Sexuality | Volunteers

POSTED: April 4, 2008

ADVANCE BIBLICAL JOURNALISM AND BEAUTIFUL STORYTELLING
Give to our nonprofit ministry today.

Read These Next

LEADERSHIP | OUTREACH

Church Discipline Really Works (pt. 1)

When you make it loving and redemptive.

AN INTERVIEW WITH KEN SANDE OF PEACEMAKER MINISTRIES.

WIRE STORY

Rick Warren Reveals Successor, Retirement Date as Saddleback Church Pastor

Echo Church's Andy Wood will take over for the well-known pastor and author on September 12.

BOB SMIETANA - RELIGION NEWS SERVICE

As for Me and My Household, We'll Resist Mammon

Money promises autonomous abundance. But we need someplace where we cannot hide.

ANDY CROUCH

DISCIPLESHIP | LEADERSHIP

Are We Missing the Point of Matthew 18?

It's about more than church discipline. It's about flourishing community.

JONATHAN T. PENNINGTON

Highlighting the **Truth**, **Goodness**, and **Beauty** of the Gospel

Your subscription helps support Christianity Today and its cause of Beautiful Orthodoxy.

SUBSCRIBE

STAY INFORMED. SIGN UP FOR OUR FREE WEEKLY NEWSLETTER.
CT's top stories of the week to encourage, challenge, and inform you.

ENTER YOUR EMAIL SIGN UP

This form is protected by reCAPTCHA and the Google Privacy Policy and Terms of Service apply.

© 2022 Christianity Today - *a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization.*