



Church Executive

HELPING LEADERS BECOME BETTER STEWARDS.

ADDRESSING SEXUAL ABUSE FROM THE PULPIT

Proactive Communication
'From the Front'

Presented by:
Love & Norris & MinistrySafe



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Proactive Communication 'From the Front'

By Gregory Love & Kimberlee Norris

In many churches, the topic of child sexual abuse is raised from the pulpit only in the context of an impending crisis within the ministry. Many ministry leaders hope to never need to address the issue of child sexual abuse from the pulpit.

The better path forward, however, is just the opposite: *to proactively address child sexual abuse.*

Why? As a general rule, ministry leaders tend to treat sexual abuse as a marginal issue; only relevant to a small subset of congregational members or participants. In reality, sexual abuse impacts *everyone*.

THE BROAD IMPACT OF SEXUAL ABUSE

Kimberlee Norris:

Several years ago, we participated in a panel discussion addressing a large crowd of lay and vocational ministry leaders. The moderator asked me if the topic of sexual abuse presented any stigma or risk of rejection as a topic 'from the front.' In response, I asked the gathering of several hundred participants to stand. I then addressed them as follows:

"I am going to describe four categories of people. In a moment, I will ask you to take a seat if you fit into *one or more* of these categories.

Category 1: YOU were sexually abused as a child.

Category 2: YOUR SPOUSE was sexually abused as a child.

Category 3: YOUR CHILD or SIBLING was sexually abused as a child.

Category 4: Your 'brother or sister of the heart' was sexually abused as a child.

If you fit into one or more of these four categories, please take a seat."

Every single participant sat. Aside from providing a dramatic and impactful illustration of the prevalence of child sexual abuse, this exercise hit home the reality that nearly all members of society are *directly* impacted by sexual abuse. So long as child sexual abuse remains taboo or secretive, abusers have the advantage of SILENCE. When child sexual abuse is discussed openly and honestly, molesters lose the advantage of SECRECY. In churches, sexual abuse should be addressed by senior leaders from the main stage. Leaders should preach about child



sexual abuse and create special events aimed at awareness, prevention and healing — both within the congregation and in the community. And, of course, ministries must provide effective *preventative* training to staff members, volunteers and parents within the congregation.

PREACHING SEXUAL ABUSE

Gregory Love:

April is Child Abuse Prevention Month. At a live training in Mississippi in March, a senior pastor — Dr. Mel — asked for suggestions concerning 'next steps' for his church. I suggested he preach about child sexual abuse during the month of April. When he asked for clarification, I explained the reality of the impact of child sexual abuse illustrated in the panel discussion described above. I suggested that he raise the topic from the pulpit and discuss the importance of the words: 'I believe you' and 'I see you.' In other words, I challenged him to bring the subject into the light and work to dispel the untruths that bind many abuse survivors, such as 'this was *my* fault,' 'no-one will believe me' or 'I did something to deserve this.'

At the same time, I cautioned this pastor, do *not* attempt this without preparation. Instead, pray over it. Prepare a care and counseling team and gather a list of local, regional and national resources. Prepare to listen patiently, offer resources for counseling and provide other forms of care.



Commit to *report* prior instances of abuse not previously reported to law enforcement — even historical allegations. Prepare to contact *other* churches or programs where abuse might have occurred. Be prepared for an overwhelming response from hurting individuals reaching out for understanding and healing; be the balm that the Church was intended to be.

ACCEPTING THE CHALLENGE

Courageously, Dr. Mel preached about child sexual abuse during the month of April. In fact, he announced in advance he would do so, and invited the entire congregation to wear blue that first Sunday — the color associated with Abuse Prevention Month. After the series concluded, Dr. Mel sent this feedback:

Yesterday, we had a special day to emphasize support for National Child Abuse Awareness Month. I have included a link to a livestream recording of one of our worship services from the day. I thought you might be blessed to watch it and know that your ministry is having a profound effect. The response to the sermons I preached about sexual abuse awareness (using information we learned from you) was overwhelming!

Anyway, I just wanted to thank you, your partners, and your staff. God is moving to help us, and He is using your ministry to do it!

Congregational Response

Dr. Mel reports that the congregational feedback was nothing but positive. The Care Team was trained and ready and responded well. One woman appeared to be overcome with emotion during the sermon and left the room. Counselors met with her and learned she was an abuse survivor, and her emotional response was not distress, but an overwhelming sense of relief and gratitude that her church was *talking* about abuse — in a healthy and healing manner.

At Dr. Mel's church, members continue to approach church leaders regarding personal experiences, seeking help, resources and guidance.

URGENCY FOR CHURCH LEADERS

Josh McDowell – Author and Christian Apologist:

The Church knows me as an author, apologist, speaker and evangelist. Some know me as family: husband, father and grandfather. None of these are my identity; my identity is in Christ.

Other aspects of my life experience are less known: I am a sexual abuse survivor, having endured abuse at the hands of a hired farm hand from the ages of 6 to 13. This is not my identity; my identity is in Christ.

Child sexual abuse is an issue of enormous proportion — even in the Church — which demands our attention and priority. Ministry leaders must understand that this is not a *new* problem. Rare is the 

pastor bold enough to talk about child sexual abuse from a pulpit; rarer still is the abuse survivor in the congregation feeling heard, valued and understood by ministry leaders. Both sides of this must change. Pastors *must* be willing to address this issue, impacting so many, with intentionality. Prevention must become a priority, and a proper response to abuse allegations must become commonplace, rather than unusual, in ministry contexts.

Learn more about Josh McDowell Ministries at www.josh.org.

OVERCOMING BARRIERS

Some ministry leaders fear that the topic of child sexual abuse is off-putting or even *frightening* to congregants. The subject is admittedly uncomfortable, as it encompasses non-consensual and harmful sexual contact, but the difficulty of a topic shouldn't keep pastors from addressing it, particularly when the issue impacts so many. Sexual abuse is an attack on individual children (typically the most vulnerable), families, marriages and churches. Take inventory of any barriers creating hesitation to speak from the front and reevaluate: whatever barriers exist, compare them to the bondage, shame, fracture and isolation experienced by so many.

BENEFITS

End the Silence and Secrecy

Addressing child sexual abuse from the *main stage* has significant benefits. A forthright communication from the pulpit acknowledging child sexual abuse supports the first step in *changing ministry culture*. When ministry leaders directly and compassionately address sexual abuse, the whole subject matter comes *out of the closet*.

Remember, the No. 1 reason children don't tell: *no one will believe me*. That tool — SECRECY — must be immediately removed from the abuser: the Church must hear *and* report. When ministry culture shifts away from silence and secrecy, encouraging a culture of communication, abuse survivors are supported, and the resulting awareness hinders the abuser's grooming process.

Invitation, Rather than Isolation

As a ministry experiences culture change in this manner, abuse survivors feel invited, rather than isolated. Pathways to healing emerge, with the Church leading the way; the Church becomes a safe place, rather than a place of silence or condemnation. As culture changes, preventative measures might be implemented and made sustainable. When congregants are given the *why*, they are more likely to embrace change that might be otherwise resisted.

CHANGE BEGINS AT THE TOP

Kimberlee Norris:

Creating and sustaining a safe environment for children *and* abuse survivors starts with senior leadership, including the senior pastor. When the need is clearly communicated by the *face* of the ministry, congregants more clearly understand that the need is real, pressing and prioritized by the ministry. In our Assessment work with ministries large and small, I have found that when senior pastors are present and participating in training and the *rolling out* of new policy expressions, constructive change occurs in a healthy manner. When the senior pastor *isn't* present, constructive change is less likely.

Senior pastors and ministry leaders must *lead by example*; clearly communicating the need for training and preventative measures by *being present* and obviously supportive. When congregants see the senior pastor (and other key ministry leaders) present and participating, constructive change is more likely to occur.

The takeaway? Senior pastors must lead the charge; anything less is simply *checking the box*.

WORDS CAN HEAL AND HURT

Gregory Love:

This encouragement to 'preach from the front' presumes preparation. Many pastors mean well but can cause great damage without an accurate understanding of child sexual abuse. Pastors must understand the abuser's *grooming process*: the process by which an abuser manipulates child victims — and their gatekeepers — into *trusted time alone*. Pastors must understand the trauma commonly experienced by victims of sexual abuse, and how that trauma varies depending on whether the abuser was a parent, sibling, coach, or held a ministry-related position. It is important that the pastor appreciate the impact based on the intensity and duration of the abuse. Pastors must understand the impact of a child attempting to make an outcry and being ignored, minimized or simply considered untruthful — an experience akin to being re-victimized.

Words 'from the front' can be a balm of healing. Words from the front can also do a great deal of damage without an appreciation of the facts and experiences. For example, it is amazing how many ministry leaders presume 'you should be over it by now' when an adult shares their story about abuse as a child many years prior. *Don't presume that*. Time, by itself, does not heal. Preparation should precede preaching.

ONGOING EFFORT

Addressing the topic of sexual abuse should be an ongoing effort — *like Easter not Christmas*.

Though Easter occurs every Spring, the message of the resurrection is not limited to a dedicated month. Commit to making sexual abuse — prevention, response and healing — part of the ongoing fabric of communication. Culture is not changed in a sermon; culture is changed by an ongoing effort to preach, teach, communicate, pray and come alongside families eager for direction. April is Child Abuse Prevention Month; that does not make April the scheduled and obligatory time to focus on abuse — like a Christmas message. April as Abuse Prevention Month was designed to help us *begin a focus* that would become an *always-focus*.

What does that look like? Communicate from the front. Invite outside experts to address leadership and families — sexual abuse counselors, trauma-informed professionals, crimes-against-children detectives and more. Allow survivors with a message of hope to share with leadership and families. Provide Parent Training to families to allow them to better protect the children in their home. Provide age-appropriate instruction to children, which will provide protection and create a pathway for already-victimized children to communicate with adults. Take all steps necessary to ensure that leadership and families clearly understand the child abuse reporting requirements and the church's commitment to follow those requirements.

SUMMARY

April is Child Abuse Prevention Month. Let's not wait until April to focus on prevention. When the culture changes, the stage is set for prevention and healing. The culture in the Church will not truly change unless ministry leaders lead — by addressing sexual abuse from the front and inviting others to share and be heard. **CE**

Kimberlee Norris and Gregory Love are partners in the Fort Worth, Texas law firm of Love & Norris [www.lovenorris.com] and founders of MinistrySafe [www.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.