



Sex Abuse in the Church: Is It Ever Too Late to Call the Police?

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Texas attorney Kimberlee Norris often gets calls from child sex abuse victims looking for representation—but the people calling her are no longer children.

Many are in their 30s or 40s, wanting help decades after having experienced child sexual abuse.

“For the first time, many are seeing the cyclical damage caused by past abuse and are looking for accountability,” Norris says.

So, is it ever too late to call the police?

“The bottom line is if it should have been reported then, it should be reported now,” Norris says.

“And that’s particularly true if a ministry worker realizes or comes to believe a cover-up has occurred.”

Norris is co-founder of MinistrySafe, a consulting organization that helps churches create safety systems to meet legal standards of care and reduce the risk of child sexual abuse. She has represented victims in child sexual abuse litigation for more than 25 years.

“The average age of individuals who call looking for representation is mid-30s,” she says. “At the time the abuse occurred, parents of abuse survivors don’t typically understand the damage.”

Her recommendation to adult victims who suffered sexual abuse as a child: File a police report.

A report helps corroborate a more recent accusation, creates a degree of accountability, and often helps the victim’s healing process.

In some states the criminal statute of limitations—the period of time during which criminal prosecution may occur—has been abolished or lengthened, and criminal prosecution moves forward.

“Reporting, even years or decades later—and perhaps in a state where the criminal statute of limitations has passed—puts the alleged perpetrator into the system,” she explains.

“When subsequent reports against the same individual are made, law enforcement may take the earlier report into account.

“The testimony of the individual who is reporting from decades ago helps to validate any current or future claims against the same perpetrator.”

While it may be tempting to confront an abuser, Norris says it’s best to leave the actual investigation to child protective services or criminal law authorities.

“It’s seldom a good idea to confront the alleged perpetrator,” she says. “Instead, simply report.”

In many states, legislatures are lengthening or abolishing statutes of limitation for both criminal prosecution and civil litigation, she says. “In fact, 34 states have significantly changed their statutes, some to take into account the technological weight of physical evidence.

“Some states have completely abolished civil statutes of limitation—meaning, even if a person hasn’t been criminally prosecuted by the authorities, a person can sue an alleged abuser for damages,” she says.

“I think this is responsive to public awareness of the issue of child abuse and the depth of damage stemming from it.”

One challenge for ministries today is understanding mandatory reporting requirements, Norris says.

“Mandatory reporting requirements vary state by state, but in every state, an adult may report suspected or alleged abuse or neglect of children,” she says.

“In some states, like Texas, every adult is a mandatory reporter of abuse or neglect.”

Reporting requirements can be fluid, so she emphasizes: When in doubt, report.

“If an abuse allegation comes to your attention—especially in the context of a ministry position—and you choose not to report it, it just doesn’t pass the ‘smell test’ in terms of public perception,” Norris says.

And what's far worse than damage to a congregation's reputation, she says, is the damage suffered by the victimized child.

"All child sexual abuse is damaging," says Norris. "And in cases where the abuse occurred in a church or ministry context, that damage may entail the loss of an individual's ability to trust God."

See the original article on Research.Lifeway.com.