

REPORTING vs. REPUTATION

The Danger of an Organization-Centered Response

By Gregory Love & Kimberlee Norris

Date: April 12, 2022

At a Christian school in West Texas, five employees were recently arrested and charged with *'Failure to Report with Intent to Conceal'* after a teen reported he had been sexually assaulted on campus, by another student. Nine days later, four administrators from another Christian school *in the same city* were arrested for *'Failure to Report with Intent to Conceal Neglect or Abuse'* related to a separate incident.

In each of these situations, school leaders were clearly required to report abuse allegations to the appropriate authorities: child protective services or law enforcement. Why was no report made? Sadly, it appears key administrators failed to report because the reputation of the organization was prioritized over child safety.

PRIORITIZING REPUTATION

In the failures referenced above, it's unclear what specifically motivated the decision-making of these school officials. Historically, abuse allegations go unreported when organizational leaders attempt to protect the organization's reputation, public image or brand, rather than prioritizing child safety and transparency.

Protecting Reputation

Developing and preserving a positive reputation is not a bad thing; in fact, it's generally wise to embody and demonstrate trustworthiness and excellence. This is particularly true when an organization serves children – such as churches, schools, daycare or camps. When an organization serves children, it's useful to have the trust and respect of the community – including families already served (internal) and prospective families (external). In child-serving ministry programs, ministry leaders are deeply invested in ministry purposes and programs, and are working to advance the *mission* of the ministry. Further, many child-serving ministries are highly dependent on donations, tithes and gifts from stakeholders who understand and support the ministry's mission. Commonly, child-serving organizations have high sensitivity to negative feedback, critical social media, and unfavorable reporting. In sum, developing and maintaining a positive image is deemed necessary and valuable.

Threats to Reputation

When a ministry faces a crisis, event or circumstance that places the ministry's reputation at risk, various challenges unfold. In response, ministry leaders take active steps to address events or circumstances in a manner that protects or preserves a positive public image.

In some circumstances, simply taking expedient action to solve the problem is appropriate; elevating the issue by communicating to parents or others is not necessary. Where an allegation of child sexual abuse is concerned, however, expedient action to simply solve the problem is insufficient.

Paradigms for Crisis Response

In crisis situations, a ministry's response may be driven by a desire to *protect the brand*. This decision-making paradigm is **organization-centric**: decisions are made and actions are taken prioritizing preservation of the organization and its reputation.

When a crisis relates to an allegation of child sexual abuse, however, a **victim-centric** approach is imperative. A victim-centric framework presupposes that decisions and actions support the well-being of the child – regardless of the impact on reputation or public perception. Where child sexual abuse is concerned, a victim-centric orientation is necessary and morally *right*. When the ministry is focused on other concerns – protection of the ministry or the alleged abuser – the outcome is ultimately unhealthy for the victimized child, ministry supporters and the ministry itself.

CLASH OF PRIORITIES

The majority of ministry leaders in child-serving contexts are committed to enriching the lives of children and youth. These are well-meaning, earnest individuals who are passionate about the health and well-being of children and youth served. The ministry's *mission* may be *child-centric*, but its problem-solving paradigm is often *organization-centric*: focused on the reputation, budget or smooth functionality of the organization. Contextualized, these ministry leaders believe that if the *ministry* is protected, children can be served. Put differently: when reputation is prioritized, children benefit. In reality, where child sexual abuse is concerned, children are sacrificed when the ministry's reputation is prioritized.

Case Study: Organization-Centric Approach

To illustrate, let's deconstruct a stereotypical abuse allegation situation.

A middle school boy is bullied by an upperclassman at a Christian school, and the bullying behavior includes a sexual component. Information about the bullying behavior is communicated to a coach. Already, there is opportunity for failure: if the coach views the behavior as simple bullying – rather than peer sexual abuse – the behavior may be addressed internally, with no report to supervisors, parents or appropriate authorities.

If the bullying behavior is communicated to administrators and recognized as peer-to-peer *sexual abuse*, school leaders should immediately shift into a *victim-centric* approach. If the natural proclivity of these administrators is *organization-centric*, they will evaluate the circumstance through a lens or perspective designed to preserve the reputation of the school, rather than protection or support of the victimized child. When leaders have an organization-centric perspective, these questions are asked:

- How many individuals know about this *already*?
- How many *need* to know?
- How can this situation be contained?
- What must we do to make this *go away*?
- What will it take to placate the child (and his or her parents)?
- What will keep them from speaking out and making the situation public, or exposing?
- Do we need legal counsel to help contain this situation?

Though well-meaning and generally committed to serving children, ministry leaders often fail in addressing child sexual abuse allegations. When child sexual abuse allegations are viewed from an organization-centric perspective, the victimized child is left unsupported, and, more often than not, the ministry is unsuccessful in protecting its *brand* and *reputation*. Instead, ministry leaders are seen as callous, defensive and self-serving in their actions, which are commonly characterized as *cover-up*.

Contrast: Victim-Centric Approach

When a crisis involves child abuse, a victim-centric approach is necessary. Let's reconstruct the hypothetical above from a victim-centric perspective.

Before a victim-centric approach is possible, staff members and volunteers must be trained to (1) understand and recognize child abuse and neglect (including peer sexual abuse); (2) understand internal lines of communication; and (3) understand legal reporting requirements. Without these fundamental steps, the following reconstruction is unlikely to occur.

In a well-trained school environment, policies related to peer-to-peer behavior are clearly communicated to all students. In the hypothetical above, the behavior of the aggressor child constitutes a clear departure from acceptable conduct. When this behavior is made known to school leaders, the following actions occur, without delay.

Notify the Authorities

In accord with school policy, a school representative *immediately* reports the abusive behavior to law enforcement authorities. In all respects, school personnel comply with legal reporting requirements, and cooperate freely and fully with law enforcement or child protective services in

any resulting investigation. To the extent possible, the identity and privacy of the victim is protected, but *not* at the expense of compliance with legal reporting requirements or resulting investigation, regardless of the wishes or concerns of the victimized child (or the child's parents). Reporting to authorities occurs FIRST, in accord with internal school policy. In peer-to-peer sexual abuse contexts, the appropriate report is to law enforcement in the county where the sexual abuse occurred, unless there is a specific process otherwise.

Care for the Victimized Child

In a victim-centric environment, school leaders take immediate steps to support the victimized child and notify the child's parents, making full and transparent disclosure, and taking steps to implement appropriate care for the child, if necessary or requested. This may mean offering counseling with a licensed professional counselor of the family's choice, and certainly requires direct and personal interaction with the child's parents or caregivers. When care for the victimized child is not prioritized, injury to the child is compounded.

Remove the Aggressive Child

The aggressor child must be immediately removed. If the behavior is admitted or corroborated by others, the abuser should be *immediately and permanently* removed from the school environment. The school's priority must be the well-being of the victimized child who was harmed by the abusive behavior of the aggressor child. If the abusive behavior is *not* admitted, or no witnesses are known, the aggressor child should be removed during the pendency of any investigation, whether external (law enforcement) or internal. Keep in mind, false allegations are rare; more than ninety percent of outcries are real and factual.

In general, all decision-making should occur through the lens of 'what is best for the victimized child', rather than any other perspective.

Notify Other Parents

Depending on the facts, it may be necessary to notify parents of other children who may have been mistreated by the aggressor child. Parents are the *primary protectors* of their own children: arming parents with information allowing them to take steps to communicate with and safeguard their children is ethically correct and in accord with the partnership fostered between parent and school. This information should be communicated to school families with transparency, reinforcing trust and the perception that the school *cares* – about the victimized child and other students who may have been negatively impacted. Transparency indicates concern for the ongoing relationship of trust between parents and school officials, who have prioritized student safety and parent trust over concern for reputation, brand or public perception. While perhaps counterintuitive, transparency inevitably *strengthens the brand*, rather than harming it.

Clearly, this degree of transparency doesn't align with an *organization-centric* approach.

When a ministry fails to communicate with parents when it would be reasonable to do so, the opposite result is likely. When information with a child safety component is withheld, and parents later learn of it, the negative reaction can be significant and severe.

Parents inevitably assign MOTIVE:

- The ministry was attempting a cover-up.
- The ministry cares about the other child's family more than mine.
- The ministry cares more about its reputation than my child.
- Ministry leaders had information to protect *their* children, but didn't equip *me* to protect *mine*.

Notifying the Public

Depending on the circumstances, it may be necessary to make a public statement. When necessary, the guiding principles are similar to those related to notifying parents; transparency should characterize the statement, rather than any attempt to obfuscate facts. When no disclosure is made in a circumstance where a public statement is warranted, the downside can be extreme, especially when mainstream and social media begin to generate a narrative, which generally alleges some level of 'cover up'.

Internal Investigation

In many cases, a fact-finding inquiry within the ministry is valuable:

- Was the inappropriate conduct isolated or widespread?
- Does a particular program or setting have an unhealthy culture?
- Did a policy violation occur?
- Do staff need more training?
- Should counseling resources be provided to children who were negatively impacted?

Before an internal investigation begins, ministry leaders should clearly lay out the *purpose* of the fact-finding inquiry or investigation. Fact-gathering can be useful to the ministry when it occurs with a *victim-centric* approach, concurrent with providing care for the victim(s) and *after* notifying authorities.

In an organization-centric paradigm, an internal investigation often precedes care for victims or reporting. It's appropriate to gather facts, but never investigate as a *condition* of reporting; report first, and let child protective services or law enforcement take appropriate steps.

When fact-gathering occurs with an *organization-centric* approach, a perception of 'cover up' commonly emerges. If enough information exists to initiate an internal investigation, a report to authorities *must* occur. Remember, legal reporting requirements mandate the report of any *reasonable suspicion of abuse or neglect*, not *proof*. In some cases, attempts to investigate internally can 'muddy the water' and disrupt efforts by law enforcement.

ERRORS TO AVOID

In addition to perceptions of ‘cover up’, there are other significant errors to avoid.

Avoiding Criminal Penalties

Reporting child abuse and neglect is more than just a good idea: *it’s the law in every state*. One legacy of the Penn State scandal is a significant uptick in criminal prosecutions for ‘failure to report’. Following the crisis at Penn State, legislatures in most states amended mandatory reporting statutes to increase the penalties for failure to report, expanded the lists of mandatory reporters, removed or further narrowed clergy privilege, and listed a time period within which the report *must* occur. When an allegation is clearly reportable and a ministry fails to report to authorities, but creates an investigative team or task force comprised of individuals from within, the perception is ‘cover up’ – within the organization and in the public at large.

Felony Charges

In most states, failure to report is deemed a misdemeanor offense, while other legislatures have elevated criminal penalties to *felony* status (Florida). In Texas, as an example, *Failure to Report with Intent to Conceal Abuse or Neglect* is a felony charge; not covered by insurance. Other states have modified reporting laws to elevate criminal penalties for failure to report – particularly when the failure has occurred repeatedly.

Failure to Notify Insurance Carrier

Most insurance policies require the insured to notify the insurance carrier when a circumstance arises that *could* give rise to a claim. This requirement is often overlooked by ministries, thereby jeopardizing insurance coverage. Insurance carriers expect to be notified before a fully-formed crisis develops, in order to have an opportunity to mitigate damages, if possible. In many cases, insurance companies provide funds for counseling care, initial ministry response and access to public relations services, *before* any claim is filed.

In the Christian school scenarios referenced above, poor decisions made by school leaders quickly escalated into a full-blown crisis – creating the very circumstance an insurance carrier would want to avoid. Contractually, the insurance carriers in the scenarios described above may move to *void coverage*, given the school's contractual breach through the failures to timely notify the carrier.

END RESULT: CRISIS

Where child sexual abuse is concerned, an organization-centric approach yields explosive failures and may result in criminal penalties. Rather than protecting the reputation, brand or public image of the ministry, an organization-centric approach nearly guarantees an opposite outcome.

CALL TO ACTION

Reporting to authorities – ALONE – is not the answer. Ministries must understand the difference between an organization-centric response and a victim-centric response. Mission statements in thousands of child-serving ministries reference a firm commitment to the enrichment and well-being of children and youth. A key ministry purpose is to serve children. In actual practice, an organization-centric response puts *brand over people*, and can significantly re-victimize an abuse survivor.

Where to start?

We can't reduce a risk we don't understand.

The single most important step a ministry can take to reduce the risk of sexual abuse is training staff members and volunteers to *understand the problem*. When staff members 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 ministry programs. (Learn more about [MinistrySafe](#) training.) *Before a crisis occurs*, ministries must create a victim-centric response plan that prioritizes *people* over brand or reputation. By doing so, the health and well-being of children is prioritized, consistent with every ministry's mission.

Kimberlee Norris and Gregory Love are partners in the Fort Worth, Texas law firm of [Love & Norris](#) and founders of [MinistrySafe](#) and [Abuse Prevention Systems](#) providing child sexual abuse expertise to child-serving organizations worldwide. After representing victims of child sexual abuse for more than two decades, Love and Norris saw recurring, predictable patterns in predatory behavior. MinistrySafe/Abuse Prevention Systems grew out of their desire to place proactive tools into the hands of child-serving professionals.

Love and Norris teach the only graduate-level course on Preventing Sexual Abuse in Ministry Contexts as Visiting Faculty at Dallas Theological Seminary.