

Church Executive

HELPING LEADERS BECOME BETTER STEWARDS.

CALLING THE CHURCH TO ACTION:
Sexual abuse prevention and healing
occur at the church level

Presented by:
Love & Norris & MinistrySafe



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Why does child sexual abuse continue to impact the Church?

Why do so many abuse survivors remain hurting and silent?

What must change in the Church?

In the last 10 years, our culture has experienced repeated clarion calls for change in the Church, calling ministries to:

- Implement effective systems for sexual abuse prevention;
- Understand and comply with legal reporting requirements; and
- Create pathways of healing and care for abuse survivors.

Denominational leaders are saying the right things, but the headlines and allegations continue to reveal that the Church's sexual abuse crisis is very much alive and ongoing. Why? Sadly, the messaging from denominational leaders is rarely reaching those who can actually make a difference: significant change must occur at the church level.

CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE PREVENTION

Church denominations universally condemn child sexual abuse, issuing resolutions and proclamations. The problem, however, is not resolved at the denominational level; instead, it must occur at the church level. Each church must implement an effective Safety System meant to prevent child sexual abuse and respond appropriately to allegations of abuse.

An effective Safety System

Where child sexual abuse is concerned, an effective Safety System includes:

- Sexual Abuse Awareness Training
- Skillful Screening Processes and Training
- Appropriate Criminal Background Checks
- Tailored Policies & Procedures, and
- Systems for Monitoring and Oversight

A topical eBook, PREVENTING CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE: AN EFFECTIVE SAFETY SYSTEM, is available for download at bit.ly/3z4xKUv.

MinistrySafe

For many denominations in the United States, MinistrySafe is the exclusive or preferred provider for resources related to child sexual abuse risk. Currently, MinistrySafe provides Safety System resources to more than 25,000 ministries, adding an additional 200 churches per month. Through MinistrySafe, churches are training more than 55,000 staff members and volunteers each month. That sounds — and is — meaningful; but given that more than 350,000 churches provide ministry services to children in the United States alone, churches that are proactive in addressing this risk are a drop in the proverbial bucket. This reality is continually revealed when ministry leaders contact the law firm (Love & Norris) seeking guidance in the midst of a crisis — a crisis that is both predictable and preventable.

So where is the breakdown?

Typically, the breakdown occurs at the church level, where children are gathered, where workers are trained concerning this risk (or not), where workers are screened (or not), and are appropriately supervised with children or students (or not).

Local church called to action

The local church has been repeatedly called to action by denominational leaders, seminaries, external organizations, risk management consultants, insurance carriers, advocacy groups and legislators.

Why is the local church so reluctant to act?

“It won’t happen here”

Many churches — especially small to medium-sized churches — work under the false assumption that ‘sexual abuse won’t happen here’ — until it does.

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

Parents want 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. In addition, when a child reports abuse within his or her core environment — the home in which the child lives — only to be disbelieved or minimized, that child is left to cope without meaningful help, resources or advocacy.

Sexual abuse should never occur in ministry contexts, but the Church and Christian ministries continue to experience its devastating impact. Families and lives have been devastated, churches of all denominations have experienced its far-reaching consequences, and ministries have been destroyed.

Unfortunately, the problem is growing.

Within the past 15 years, verdicts, judgments, or settlements exceeding hundreds of millions of dollars have been levied against churches for sexual abuse allegations related to children participating in ministry programs.

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. Many secular organizations have responded to this inevitable truth by implementing policies and training to reduce risk. Ministries, however, tend to do less, failing to recognize the risk or laboring under the misconception “it won’t happen here.”

Standards of care embraced by secular child-serving entities have risen dramatically in the past 15 years. Secular organizations 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, which are rare, while safeguarding children in child-serving programs.

As public awareness and secular standards of care rise, sexual abusers look for access to children in places where protections are few: the Church. The Church needs protection, but many churches fail to effectively address this risk. Denominational leaders and others are calling for change, but the call is not being answered at the church level.

HEALING

Like prevention, denominations make resolutions and proclamations concerning the importance of care and healing for abuse survivors. Advocacy groups continue to criticize these resolutions as hollow and meaningless, because the proclamations are rarely coupled with meaningful effort to address the injury, suffering and trauma experienced by abuse survivors. Sadly, denominational leaders making these proclamations are rarely able to actually minister to abuse survivors; this must occur at the church level.

Like prevention, shortcomings and missed opportunities continue to occur at the church level. The Church should be actively developing pathways of care and healing and inviting victims of sexual abuse to participate in trauma-informed programs. After decades of sexual abuse allegations and outcries, the Church remains largely misinformed and inactive.

MODELS OF CARE

Care comes from individuals. Sometimes these individuals are professionals (One-to-One Model); sometimes care is initiated by members

of a church body willing to create pathways of healing within the church community (One-Another Model).

One-to-One Model

The most common model of care contemplates the One-to-One Model: denominations and churches creating a list of counselors and counseling resources. In short: we want victims to get help — and here is a list of people who can help them. There is great value in one-to-one counseling sessions, particularly when the counselor has received trauma-informed training related to child sexual abuse.

The One-to-One model has limitations, however. Conservative studies report more than 60 million sexual abuse survivors in the United States alone; there simply aren't enough trauma-informed counseling professionals to meet that need. Additionally, counseling costs present a barrier to access for many abuse survivors. Finally, many survivors remain in a vicious cycle of silence, believing that “no one will believe me”; “somehow it was my fault”; and “I'm the only one.”

The One-to-One Model provides significant value but does not create a sufficiently wide pathway of care to meet the enormous need.

One-Another Model

Denominations continue to issue proclamations and resolutions calling for the Church to become a place of healing. For many churches, the solution is to outsource care to outside help; the One-to-One Model. Other churches want to provide care, but don't know how. Stepping into this need, one pastor with decades of experience in sexual abuse care created a program deployed at the church level: the One-Another Model. ➤

Dr. James Reeves:

Biblical commands sprinkled throughout the New Testament form the basis for the One-Another Model. As Christ-followers, we are to love one another, encourage one another and bear one another's burdens. The New Testament contains 27 "one another" exhortations.

The One-Another Model

The One-Another Model of care is patterned after the proven experience of Alcoholics Anonymous, which is based on two fundamental premises. First, sobriety is best achieved and maintained in association with others; in other words, in community with one another. Second, no one is more qualified to help another alcoholic than a recovering alcoholic. Millions of recovering alcoholics are living in sobriety, in community with other recovering alcoholics.

How might this apply to healing from child sexual abuse in the context of the local church? No one is more qualified to help an abuse survivor heal from past sexual abuse than another abuse survivor further along in the healing process. Survivors who are further along in the healing journey become a community of help, hope and healing for a survivor just beginning the process. Just as recovering alcoholics joyfully assist other alcoholics, abuse survivors in the healing process help other survivors: this assistance becomes vital to their own healing journey.

Likewise, sobriety is a lifelong experience, and healing from sexual abuse is a lifelong journey. The local church provides an ideal source of lifelong community for abuse survivors. Equipped with quality tools and resources, this community of individuals, sharing a common experience, can move together toward healing.

To support the One-Another Model, my wife and I developed the Fearless Series for Women and the Fearless Series for Men.

The Fearless Series Program

The Fearless Series contemplates 13 weekly meetings, which might be followed by intensive individual or group guided study using the *Fearless Series Workbook* and *Pure Hope Discussion Guide*.

The Fearless Series for Women [[Fs4Women.com](https://www.Fs4Women.com)], designed for implementation in the local church, consists of three parts.

Weeks 1-5: The Fearless Video Series

The video series consists of five 30-minute videos watched by women together. Each video is followed by one hour of small group discussion led by a facilitator. Each small group should be limited to six to eight women. This element of the Series is intended for ALL WOMEN, not limited to abuse survivors, for two reasons:

1) This small group context provides a safe entry point for survivors by creating an opportunity to enter the group without disclosing past sexual abuse. Given the sense of shame that commonly accompanies sexual abuse, many survivors wouldn't respond to an event designed only for those who have experienced abuse.

2) All women — not just survivors — should understand the five topics covered in the series, for themselves and for their children. These topics include:

- The prevalence of child sexual abuse;
- Typical issues encountered by the abuse survivor;
- Why ministry to survivors should occur in the local church;
- How parents can help children to speak up if he or she has an uncomfortable experience; and
- A description of the pathway to healing from child sexual abuse.

Weeks 6-13: The Fearless Series Workbook

This intensive eight-week workbook addresses issues which all abuse survivors must address. Subjects include shame, lies we believe

and, ultimately, forgiveness: never required by another, or closely in time to the abusive behavior (aka 'cheap forgiveness'). This workbook study is intended for abuse survivors in a small group context, led by a trained facilitator.

Workbook small groups should consist of women who have disclosed child sexual abuse during small group discussions in Weeks 1-5 (video series).

Weeks 14-65: The Pure Hope Discussion Guide

The 52-week discussion guide is intended for abuse survivors who wish to continue meeting on a weekly basis, continuing to process the principles of healing learned from the video series and workbook study in the first 13 weeks.

The Fearless Series for Men

Similar in content to that created for women, The Fearless Series for Men includes five 30-minute videos, followed by one hour of small group discussion led by a facilitator. The *Fearless Series Workbook for Men* supports an eight-week process addressing issues all abuse survivors should address, with specific focus on issues unique to men.

After this intensive process is completed, participants might elect to participate in a 52-week discussion guide, meeting on a weekly basis and continuing to process the principles of healing learned from the video series and workbook study. The anticipated release date for the Men's Series is Spring 2023.

For both men and women, healing is best achieved when an abuse survivor has access to the One-to-One Model and the One-Another Model. The Fearless Series provides a foundational resource for ongoing ministry to survivors in a spiritual community provided by the local church.

Summary

Prevention is accomplished at the church level, beginning with an understanding of the risk and the deployment of an effective Safety System. Denominations should express the priority of prevention and identify good resources. The local church, however, must engage.

Healing can — and should — be accomplished at the church level. The local church must make survivor care a priority, followed by a framework offering access to both models of care. The church can facilitate the One-to-One Model by researching competent, trauma-informed counseling resources and subsidizing the costs of access. The church can facilitate the One-Another Model by evaluating effective resources (such as the Fearless Series) and providing survivor care as a specific ministry offering. **CE**

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

Dr. James Reeves is the founding pastor of Fort Worth's City On A Hill Church (1984), and regularly sees wounded individuals find hope and restoration through Jesus Christ. After receiving his B.A. in ancient Greek from Baylor University in 1976, Dr. Reeves received his MDiv. and DMin. degrees from Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in 1981 and 1988, respectively. He has served as a pastor for more than 40 years.