

Church Executive

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**Child sexual abuse:
10 facts every pastor should know**

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Love & Norris & MinistrySafe



CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE:

10 facts every pastor should know

By Georgia McKnight, featuring Kimberlee

'Church Rocked by Sexual Abuse Allegations'

The headline stunned the members of a large evangelical church in western Pennsylvania. Church leaders took hundreds of telephone calls from members, media representatives and advocacy groups. Social media coverage was immediate and savage, with posts assuming the worst possible motives attributable to the actions of church leaders.



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It was immediately clear that the church had no *plan in place* to address the risk of child sexual abuse or an appropriate response to an allegation.



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Attendance suffered. After years of rebuilding, the church continues to struggle, and has moved to a smaller location to pay ongoing litigation costs and settlements.

#1: Every church is at risk

The Church and its children are increasingly endangered by sexual predators whose opportunity to ensnare children elsewhere is growing smaller, while the Church continues to open its doors to anyone. Abusers gravitate to places where preventative measures are lower: because the Church is grace-based, trusting and forgiving, abusers find easy access to children.

Kimberlee Norris: The Church is uniquely at risk for child sexual abuse. In the Church, we tend to believe what people say about themselves, and that those who want to work with children have the right motives for doing so. In most cases, that's true, but the Church isn't particularly skilled at recognizing risky candidates who should not work with kids. Churches too often have the misconception that 'sexual abuse doesn't happen here,' which is completely inaccurate, because child sexual abuse skips *no* spiritual paradigm. In fact, one very large study



indicated that the prevalence of child sexual abuse is slightly higher in *very religious environments*.

#2: The problem is growing

Conservative studies indicate that *one out of four* girls and *one out of six* boys will be sexually abused before reaching 18 years of age, regardless of spiritual or socio-economic demographic. Two out of three children *won't tell* until adulthood, assuming they tell at all. *The problem is growing*, even in ministry environments.

Norris: The average age of abuse survivors who call our law firm is mid-30s, and they commonly haven't spoken about the abuse up to that point. I think that's because they've reached an age where they recognize the patterns stemming from the abuse, or are looking for accountability in some form, perhaps for the first time.

#3: The cost to individuals and ministries is exponential

Every study in the past decade indicates the same reality: the largest settlements paid in church or ministry contexts are related to child sexual abuse. This is the only area of law in which statutes of limitation — the time period within which a litigant must file a lawsuit — are getting *longer*, not shorter. In one California case, a 76-year-old man sued his church related to events occurring when he was between 8 and 11 years of age.



Moreover, few statutes include limitation on monetary awards that stem from child sexual abuse claims. For churches, child sexual abuse is a significant, long-term risk.

Norris: More importantly, the cost to victims and their families is astronomical. The emotional and psychological harm of sexual abuse is long term, and it impacts individual abuse survivors, their spouses and families. There is *no single issue* with greater impact on emotional health than child sexual abuse. When a child is sexually abused by a trusted adult in the Church, he or she is likely to later feel betrayed, embittered, hurt and ultimately abandoned. Many abuse survivors struggle to trust other authority figures, *especially* church leaders.

A *close second*, in terms of negative impact, is when a child tells a trusted ministry leader of abuse occurring at home, or within the child's core world, and that leader fails to *believe* the child, *report* the abusive behavior to authorities, and provide support and care after the outcry. Too many ministry leaders try to address this issue 'within the congregation' or 'within the family,' which leaves the child unprotected.

#4: You can't address a risk that you don't understand

What is the single most important step the Church can take? *Train your people to understand the problem.* You cannot address a risk that your staff members and volunteers do not understand. When staff

members have an awareness of the characteristics and 'grooming process' of the sexual abuser, they are better equipped to recognize and prevent sexual abuse.

Norris: In more than 30 years of law practice in this realm, I have yet to encounter a circumstance where no one saw *anything*. Instead, we encounter ministry leaders who don't understand how this risk might manifest, or don't really have a category for this type of behavior. In other words, "I saw something, and it seemed odd, but I didn't know what was going on." Or, "I heard about some unusual behavior, but I didn't know who to tell, or what it might mean."

This is not, in my opinion, an intuitive risk. The Church will never be *accidentally excellent* at this: it takes training to understand sexual abuse, sexual abusers and abuser behaviors.

#5: The offender's 'grooming process' is the key

The grooming process of the sexual offender is known, validated and understandable. Offenders 'groom' a child for abuse: gaining access to children within the offender's *age and gender of preference*, selecting a specific child, introducing nudity and sexual touch, then keeping the child silent. This process is recognizable, and church staff members should be familiar with the process and how it might play out in ministry contexts. [▶](#)

Norris: So here's the good news: many aspects of the abuser's grooming process are **VISIBLE**. And because it's visible, it's *preventable*. If we train our staff members and volunteers to recognize *common grooming behaviors*, and we have *and enforce* policies around these common behaviors, we can protect children in the Church. It's really not rocket science, but it's not intuitive either: it takes training and intentionality.

#6: Policies are what you do, not what you say you do

When an allegation of sexual abuse results in civil litigation, both defense counsel and plaintiff's counsel will immediately request a ministry's written policies. Policies demonstrate a ministry's *reasonable efforts* to address the known risk of child sexual abuse, but they're only effective if enforced. Often, staff members and volunteers need to understand the 'why' of preventative protocols in order to adopt the 'what,' and that boils down to *training*.

Norris: In my experience, some ministries have policies that read like "legalese" or look like *War and Peace*. My first question to any client is, "How many of your boots in the sand know what this says? And what assurance do you have that this is *actually* happening?"

Good policy dovetails with training and addresses *common grooming behaviors*. I'm a big fan of *bright lines* — very explicit written communication that 'this is OK' and 'this is NOT OK', particularly where touch and physical interaction with children is concerned. At the same time, great policies that aren't enforced are pretty useless, and might be detrimental: they create an *internal* standard of care that isn't followed.

#7: Criminal background checks are not enough

Criminal background checks are no 'silver bullet', because less than 10% of sexual abusers will encounter the criminal justice system, *ever*. Background checks *alone* cannot eliminate risk, but they can provide useful information when used effectively. For each staff member or volunteer, the depth of a criminal background check should be determined by the level of trust and extent of direct contact with children.

Norris: There are staff members and high-profile volunteers in your ministry program about whom you *cannot* afford to be wrong! These high-trust positions require a deeper background check, which is going to cost more. There simply is no 'one size fits all' background check, and if you are running all your employees and volunteers through the same level of check, you aren't meeting the current legal standard of care where background checks are concerned. This is another area where training is key: ministry managers who hire or screen employees and volunteers should be trained to recognize *plea-down, stair step* and *grooming* criminal offenses.

#8: 'Matching tags' do not solve the problem

Matching tags rely on the concept of 'Stranger Danger' — not an effective preventative protocol, because *90% of children are victimized by someone they know and trust — not a stranger*. The child check-in system was simply not designed to address the risk of child sexual abuse.

Norris: Basic security measures are reasonable, like limitations on who can access the children's wing, or who has easy access to the youth ministry area. Security teams and video cameras have value for basic security issues, but the majority of sexual abuse cases in the church involve a perpetrator *inside the proverbial 'fence'*, not a stranger on property.

#9: Sexual abusers are looking for trusted time alone with your kids

Norris: That means churches should have a two-adult rule in place and, at minimum, a mandate that prohibits one-to-one, unsupervised, unstructured interaction between an adult and a child in ministry programs. Molesters *groom the gatekeepers* — ministry leaders and co-workers — to believe they are trustworthy, responsible people. This is intentional: you are not going to trust someone *alone* with a child in your program unless you believe that person to be trustworthy. This is why, when a sexual abuse crisis is revealed, and people around that circumstance are asked about the alleged perpetrator, we almost always hear "He seemed like the nicest guy" or "She seemed so responsible." This isn't coincidental! Molesters *groom* ministry leaders to get *access to children*.

#10: Prevention of child sexual abuse requires a system of protection

There is no standalone safety protocol. An effective Safety System includes:

- **Sexual Abuse Awareness Training** to equip staff members and volunteers with a better understanding of the characteristics, *grooming process* and *common grooming behaviors* of sexual offenders.
- **Skillful Screening** which uses screening forms and processes *meant to elicit a high-risk response*, thereby *keeping 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.
- **Appropriate Criminal Background Checks** which, while they cannot *eliminate* risk, can be a helpful tool when used effectively. For each staff member or volunteer, the depth of a criminal background check should be determined by the level of trust or extent of direct contact with children.
- **Tailored Policies and Procedures** that illustrate a ministry's *reasonable efforts* to address the risk of child sexual abuse. Policies should be succinct, understandable, and tailored to ministry programs. Remember, *policies are what you do, not what you say you do*.
- **Monitoring and Oversight** which requires a periodic review of safety system elements, evaluating new programs and addressing ongoing need for policy updates. [CB](#)

Georgia McKnight is a third-year law student at Duke University School of Law. She is the author of *Children Should Win: The FCRA Amendment Necessary to Facilitate Child Protection*, addressing the use of background checks in child-serving contexts, and has recently completed a rotation in the Duke Law Children's Clinic, providing access to legal services and representation to low-income families.

Kimberlee Norris is a partner in the Fort Worth, Texas law firm of Love & Norris and a co-founder of MinistrySafe, providing child sexual abuse expertise to ministries worldwide. After representing victims of child sexual abuse for more than 30 years, Gregory Love and Kimberlee Norris saw recurring, predictable patterns in predatory behavior. MinistrySafe [ministrysafe.com] grew out of a desire to place this information into the hands of ministry professionals, providing effective safety protocols to protect the Church and its children from the devastating impact of child sexual abuse. MinistrySafe trains more than 60,000 ministry personnel each month in live and online formats.

Representative clients include the United States Olympic Committee, Awana International, Church of the Nazarene, Methodist Conferences, the Christian Camp and Conference Association, Reformed University Fellowship, Baptist associations, and many churches, schools, camps, and ministries.