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STOP SEXUAL ABUSE:

How to navigate a sexual abuse allegation from the past

Presented by:





STOP SEXUAL ABUSE:

How to navigate a sexual abuse allegation *from the PAST*

By Gregory Love and Kimberlee Norris

Historical allegations — those that relate to alleged abuse occurring years or decades ago — have become common. In the past two decades, churches of all sizes have encountered sexual abuse allegations related to abusive behavior occurring at the hands of staff members or volunteers from the *past*.

When an allegation of child sexual abuse stems from behavior occurring in the distant past, what is the church's responsibility? How can church leaders respond WELL when the alleged bad actor might no longer be involved, no longer *alive*, or records are minimal or nonexistent?

When a historical allegation comes to light, particularly when the victim is now an *adult*, many churches assume they have no responsibility to report to law enforcement. This is short-sighted, at best. For reporting purposes, ministries should treat any allegation as if the alleged abuse occurred *today*.

If the alleged abuse occurred 'on your watch' or the alleged abuser is a current or former staff member or volunteer, *report* to the appropriate authorities. *Do not* assume that the passage of time makes a report time-barred or irrelevant; from a public perception standpoint, this looks like coverup, and simply doesn't pass the 'smell test'. Additionally, failure to report creates no accountability for the alleged abuser, who might have moved on to other ministry roles and fails to prioritize the protection of *other* potential victims.

In general, when in doubt ... *report*.

THE CHURCH'S RESPONSE MUST BE VICTIM-CENTRIC

Many ministry leaders do not understand sexual abuse, sexual abusers, or what an appropriate response to an allegation looks like.

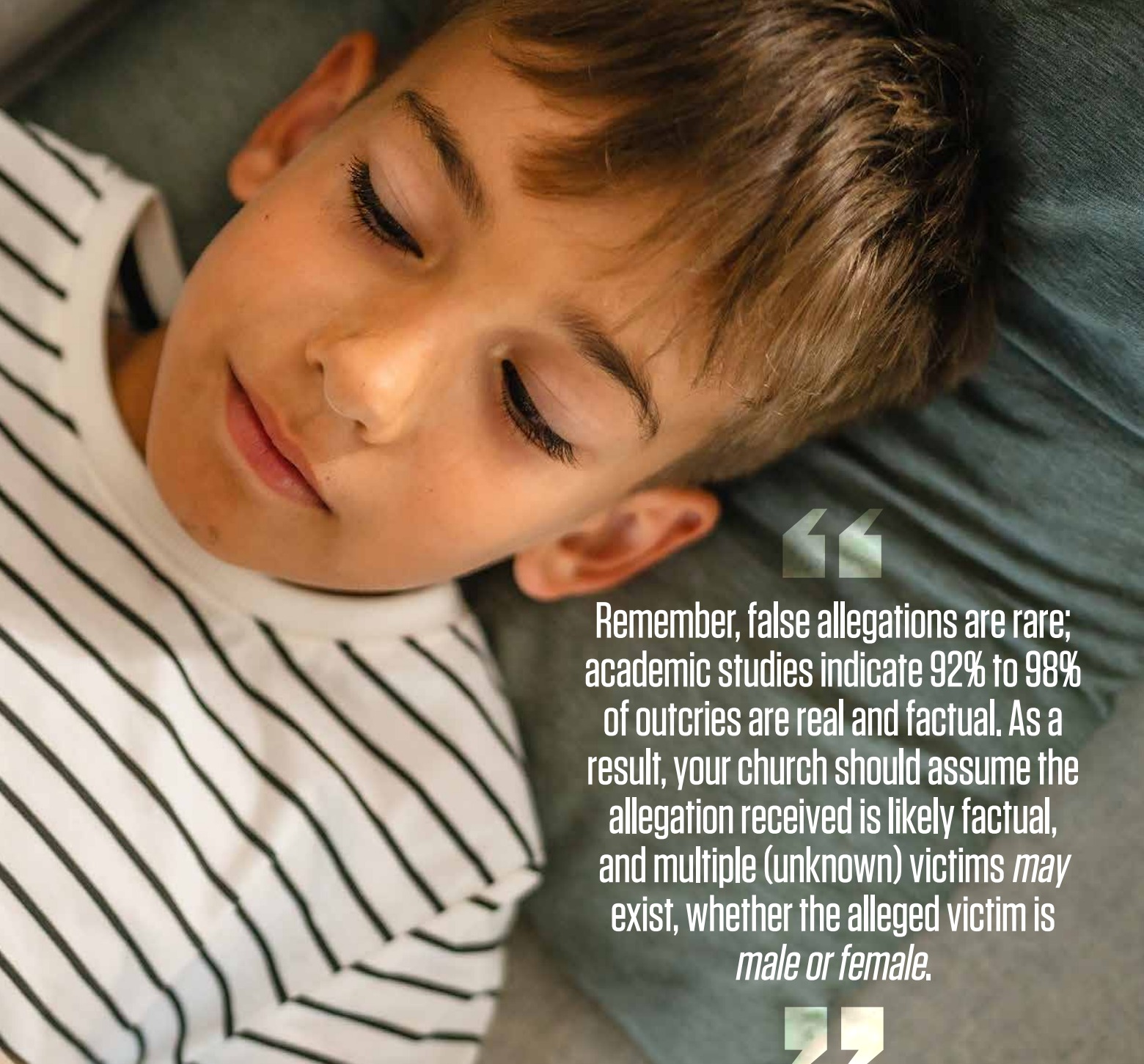
Consequently, *wrong responses* to historical allegations abound.

In any allegation response, adopting a 'victim-centric' approach is fundamental. Abuse survivors should be treated with dignity and care, because the perspective adopted by the ministry will shape its actions and priorities, *regardless* of when the alleged behavior occurred.

After reporting to law enforcement, the church's concurrent priority should be protecting and caring for the alleged victim and his or her family, and determining if *other* victims exist in the ministry program, even from the deep past. Keep in mind: when an allegation is received, there are very few 'neutral' statements or positions. The ministry's response will be either victim-centric or *other-centric*: actions and statements that clearly demonstrate a priority for something or someone *other than the victim*.

False allegations are rare

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Avoid a ministry-centric response

In some cases, a ministry adopts a *ministry-centric* response: communicating and acting in a defensive manner meant to serve the best interests of the ministry, rather than the victim.

Steer clear of an abuser-centric response

A truly harmful ministry response is abuser-centric: communicating and acting in a manner meant to protect the alleged abuser.

Regardless of the passage of time, public statements focusing on the risk to the alleged abuser — his or her marriage, career, reputation or future — are inappropriate. This defensive response is common when an allegation from the past relates to an individual who is influential or still involved in the ministry's upper leadership. The ministry's response should NEVER depend upon the influential position or role of the alleged bad actor.

CREATE A PRE-EXISTING PLAN

Every ministry should have a *pre-existing plan* to address sexual abuse allegations, including allegations from the past. This plan should:

- Be written, known to church leaders, and periodically reviewed.
- Be followed regardless of the identity of the alleged abuser — senior pastor, VBS face-painter or volunteer. *NO ONE should be outside the scope of the plan.*
- Identify each individual's specific responsibilities, contact information for critical personnel (insurance agent, carrier, attorney), and location of critical documents (relevant state reporting law, insurance policies).
- Include clear instructions concerning reporting requirements: to whom, within what timeframe, and what information to report.
- Require that each individual making a report on behalf of the ministry request a *file number* and name of agency representative to be included in a dated incident report.
- Designate an information point person within the ministry, and a communication tree (phone, email and/or text) to inform key staff members, lay leaders and ministry stakeholders. The point person >>



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should be someone who can communicate with empathy and care but resist the impulse to ‘free-form’.

- Outline immediate care and communication extended to the victim(s), the victim’s family and others directly impacted by the alleged abuse.

COMMUNICATING WITH THE CONGREGATION

When faced with an abuse allegation from the past, too many ministries succumb to the temptation to say little or nothing, attempting to limit the information to a select few. This course of action seldom works out well for anyone; victims feel abandoned; leaders feel unfairly vilified; members feel minimized and left in the dark; and public perception of the ministry suffers.

Instead, immediate and transparent communication with church members, staff members and ministry supporters is key. Church members — and the public as a whole — tend to extend significant grace to leaders who quickly address allegations, even if the church or its leaders erred in the past.

COMMUNICATING WITH ABUSE SURVIVORS AND THEIR FAMILIES

A ministry’s allegation response plan should address ongoing support, care and communication with the victim(s) and their families, regardless of the time frame of the allegation. Keep in mind:

- Communication early and often.
- Listen with an empathetic ear.
- Set aside defensiveness or justifications.
- Understand that parents will likely need to VENT.
- Victims and their families might feel angry, bitter or resentful.
- Do not attempt to facilitate superficial *forgiveness*.

- Understand that ministry to abuse survivors and their families will require long-term commitment; *there is no quick fix*.
- Offer to pay for the services of a counselor of the victim’s choice.

Remember, effective communication and care now is morally right and biblically sound.

PREVENTION

Developing a response plan is imperative, but an effective Safety System aimed at preventing sexual abuse is a ministry’s best protection from sexual abuse harm and resulting damages. When an allegation from the past comes to light, take this opportunity to analyze *existing* safety protocols, including screening practices, training, policies and procedures, and systems for monitoring and oversight. Your church Safety System should work to effectively limit interaction between an adult and a *single child*.

Effective training equips church staff members with a better understanding of child sexual abuse and sexual abusers, which serves the church whether working to *prevent* abuse, or respond well to an allegation. With effective training, ministry leaders are better able to respond to historical abuse allegations with sensitivity and clarity. **CE**

Kimberlee Norris and Gregory Love are partners in the Fort Worth, Texas law firm of **Love & Norris** and founders of **MinistrySafe**, 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. They are guest editors for Church Executive.