



Church Executive™

HELPING LEADERS BECOME BETTER STEWARDS.

SEXUAL ABUSE PREVENTION IN THE CHURCH

25 years in review

Presented by:
Love & Norris + MinistrySafe

SEXUAL ABUSE PREVENTION IN THE CHURCH

25 years in review

By Georgia McKnight

The risk of child sexual abuse in the Church is real ... *and not new.*

Media in its various forms has bristled with horrifying headlines for three decades; few have provided any positive coverage. Since 2000, steady messaging from insurance professionals, lawmakers and subject matter experts has revealed a lack in the Church's understanding of child sexual abuse risk: how the risk might manifest, appropriate prevention, and reasonable response to an allegation.

In the past two decades, *child sexual abuse allegations* have remained the No. 1 reason churches have ended up in the courtroom or embroiled in civil litigation. It's no surprise that every major denomination has encountered a high-profile sexual abuse crisis — some are currently ongoing.

What has changed in the last 25 years? Is there any good news?

Since 2000, how has the Church responded? Are churches getting better or more proactive about prevention?

Gregory Love and Kimberlee Norris, founders and directors of [MinistrySafe](#), are sexual abuse attorneys with more than 60 years combined experience in child sexual abuse risk. Love and Norris have provided child sexual abuse resources to ministries and child-serving organizations for decades, on the front line in developing standards of care, initiating change in culture and developing *best practices*. From their perspective as industry leaders, Love and Norris speak to the significant developments since 2000, and the Church's response.

CRISES DRIVE CHANGE

Beginning in the late 1990s, various crises have driven the cultural response to child sexual abuse — *the Catholic Church litigation (1997)*, *Penn State University crisis (2011)*, *USA Gymnastics litigation (2015)*, and *Boy Scouts of America litigation (2023)*. The landscape changed, improving the likelihood that the local church might become *aware* of child sexual abuse risk inherent in ministry programming, perhaps for the first time. Prior to the media-blitzed crises above, the general public (and most



church congregations) remained largely ignorant about the prevalence or impact of child sexual abuse. As a result, misconceptions ruled, churches had few preventative protocols in place, and church leaders responded poorly to allegations that came to light. As awareness heightened, the availability and accessibility of training and other resources grew.

Training resources

“In general, *we can't reduce a risk we don't understand*,” says Love, “and sexual abuse is a risk that most ministry leaders don't understand. Sexual abuse risk is *knowable*, but it's not *intuitive*, which means: *churches will never accidentally get this right*.” Love says individual churches — where efforts related to safety are generally deployed — must receive training about offender characteristics and peer-to-peer sexual abuse.

Before 2000, excellent training — indeed any training — was not easily available to ministry leaders; what did exist was not tailored to ministry programs. In 2025, a wide variety of training providers and resources provide instruction delivered live or online, tailored to program types and denominational nomenclature and polity, and provided in many languages. For example, MinistrySafe offers a library of Trainings in English and Spanish and closed captioned in 11 other languages currently used on five continents. (See sidebar: AVAILABLE TRAININGS)



Conferences and Seminars

Over the past decade, child sexual abuse risk has become a mainstay topic at ministry conferences provided by a variety of organizations, including: XPastor, The Church Network, RightNow Media, Modern Church Leader, Christian Camp & Conference Association and others. Sadly, many conferences and organizations that direct content to youth and student ministry — where risk is greatest — have been *almost entirely silent*.

In short, when churches make sexual abuse prevention a priority, resources are available and easily accessible.

Background Checks

Since 2000, the background check as a resource presents a mixed blessing. On the positive side, there are now countless background search providers offering a variety of search package options at competitive prices. On the other hand, churches have an unrealistic view of the effectiveness of a background check and therefore rely too heavily on a background check as a stand-alone solution to the problem.

“Churches must understand: a background check provides one element of an effective safety system ... *but not a stand-alone solution*,” says Norris. “If that’s your entire screening process, your process is woefully inadequate,

There have been countless calls to action in the last 25 years. The resources are available and accessible. The Church needs to act.

AVAILABLE TRAININGS

- Sexual Abuse Awareness Training
- Specialty Segments:
 - Camp
 - Daycare
 - Education
 - Special Needs
 - Youth Ministry
 - Youth Sports
- Skillful Screening Training
- Peer-to-Peer Sexual Abuse Training
- Parent/Guardian Training
- Sexual Abuse Awareness Training for Vulnerable Adult Programs
- Sexual Harassment: Supervisors
- Sexual Harassment: Staff Members
- Child Safety Workshop
- Background Checks Training
- Policies and Procedures
- Reporting Child Sexual Abuse
- California Assembly Bill 506
- Third-Party Use of Facilities
- Agents and Underwriters
- MinistrySafe Institute

because less than 10 percent of abusers will *ever encounter* the criminal justice system.”

Further, says Norris, many background check providers cut corners or mislead churches concerning the records that are actually searched and reported.

Visit the [MinistrySafe website](#) for more information about the efficacy of background checks and how many providers contractually limit search scopes and reports.

ARE CHURCHES RESPONDING?

Over the last 25 years, many churches have been raising the bar.

“Many ministries are being proactive, rather than reactive, about this risk, and that’s a significant change,” says Norris, who provides legal counsel to MinistrySafe members at a reduced fee. “More and more, I encounter ministry leaders who are asking how to *respond well* to an allegation very recently encountered, who want to do the right thing *now*, rather than address a circumstance that has already blown up in their faces,” she says. “That’s encouraging!”

The minimum

Unfortunately, some churches continue to do little, or nothing at all. Notwithstanding 25 years of media and messaging, some churches are doing nothing to protect children from sexual abuse. When a church decides to do ‘something’, it usually requires background checks for staff members or child-serving volunteers.

One survey of Baptist churches conducted in 2024 reported that only 58% of Southern Baptist congregations were using background checks. Although it was reported as a positive, consider the reverse: 42% of Southern Baptist congregations responding to the survey were not requiring background checks: *the absolute minimum*. If a church does not require background checks, it is difficult to imagine any other safety ➤

“Sadly, many conferences and organizations that direct content to youth and student ministry — where risk is greatest — have been *almost entirely silent*.

In short, when churches make sexual abuse prevention a priority, resources are available and easily accessible.”



Kimberlee Norris and Gregory Love

system element in place. Though the survey reflected responses from Baptists, the findings are likely consistent for other denominations, with the exception of hierarchical groups that mandate certain child safety elements.

An effective safety system to protect children from sexual abuse includes at least five elements:

- **Sexual Abuse Awareness Training**
- **Skillful Screening Processes and Training**
- **Appropriate Background Check**
- **Tailored Policies & Procedures** and
- **Systems for Monitoring and Oversight.**

At MinistrySafe, this is referred to as the 5-Part Safety System

In 2025, resources are readily available related to this risk; unfortunately, many churches haven't taken a single step toward abuse prevention.

Denominational action

As of 2025, *every* denomination has wrestled with a significant child sexual abuse issue. Denominational leaders know this risk exists in ministry programs.

Are denominational leaders communicating to downstream churches?

If the denomination has the authority to *mandate* requirements, is that authority being exercised?

If the denomination does not have the authority to mandate, is there *strong encouragement*?

Fear of communicating expectations

Too often, denominational leaders are unwilling to *require* change, whether polity permits or not. There seems to be a fear that if a requirement or standard is created, it will create a bar that the downstream churches are not meeting. It communicates an unwillingness to communicate a bright-line standard that churches are *already* well below. It is important to note: the communication does not *create* the risk or liability; the risk of liability *already* exists.

Fear of liability

Additionally, there is a fear that strong denominational messaging could result in the denomination being joined in a lawsuit from an abuse allegation arising from a downstream church. Clearly, there is legal advice being given to denominational leaders that should be ignored; in the meantime, children are victimized.

The facts

“Messaging expectations to downstream churches does not create the standard of care; *the standard of care already exists*,” says Norris. “All child-serving organizations — including churches — should take reasonable steps to prevent foreseeable risks. Clearly, when the church gathers children, child sexual abuse is a foreseeable risk.”

Regardless of what is currently communicated by denominational leaders, says Norris, the 5-Part Safety System is already recommended or required by the majority of insurance companies providing coverage to ministries.

“Regardless of which preventative resources are utilized, staying quiet at the top disserves the downstream churches and the children served,” Love says. “Children deserve a full-throated call for protection.”

Norris concurs: “There have been countless learning opportunities in the last twenty-five years,” she says. “The Church should be the safest place in town for children: we **MUST** get this right!” **CE**