

# Denhollander urges Christian colleges to condemn sex abuse

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WASHINGTON (RNS)—Abuse survivor and activist Rachael Denhollander brought her advocacy to presidents of evangelical colleges, urging them at their annual conference to not discount sexual abuse but to instead support survivors who report it.

“As Christian institutions you are the most equipped to condemn sexual abuse and objectification,” she told dozens of attendees of the Presidents Conference of the Council for Christian Colleges and Universities on Jan. 31. “You are the most equipped to help survivors to understand and teach your students to understand this is wrong. It is evil. And it matters to me because it matters to God.”

Denhollander is a lawyer and former gymnast who was the first woman to publicly accuse former Michigan State University and USA Gymnastics doctor Larry Nassar of sexual assault. She has been encouraging denomination leaders and churches to increase their attention and response to sexual abuse and has recently wrote the book *What Is a Girl Worth?*

“What you need to understand is that when you do not do this with your policies, your counseling programs, your classes and how you are educating the next generation, when you do not do this, you are not in agreement with what God says, you are not properly portraying the character of an all-holy God.”

# Timed to coincide with Title IX changes

Shirley V. Hoogstra, CCCU president, introduced Denhollander to the conference, a three-day gathering of 100 presidents of evangelical higher education institutions, and affirmed the need to address the issue with faith and compassion.

“Human beings take advantage of others for their own purpose, but, because of our faith, we can actually look unsparingly at these events,” said Hoogstra, whose organization timed the discussion to pending changes in Title IX regulations that govern how colleges address sex discrimination. “We can face the real facts and potentially be a redemptive force amid human failing.”



Panelists (left to right) Rachael Denhollander, Kathryn Nash and Shirley V. Hoogstra participate in a discussion during the Presidents Conference of the Council for Christian Colleges and Universities on Jan. 31 in Washington. (RNS photo by Adelle M. Banks)

Kathryn Nash, a higher education attorney with the firm Lathrop GPM, joined Denhollander and Hoogstra for the plenary titled “The Lion and the

Lamb: How Christian Theology Shapes Our Approach and Response to Abuse.”

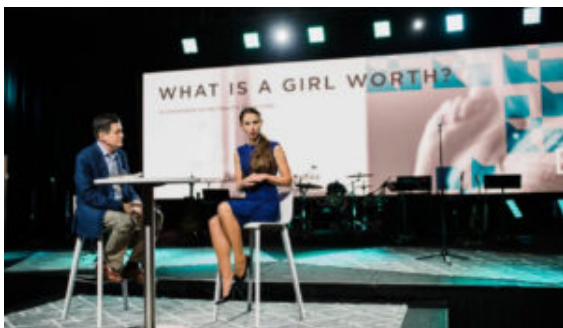
Nash stressed the necessity for sufficient training not only of Title IX investigators on college campuses but anyone to whom a student may reveal an allegation of sexual abuse.

“Who is most likely to get the report from one of your community members? I hope it’s your Title IX coordinator, but it’s probably not your Title IX coordinator,” she said. “It’s an RA (resident assistant). It’s a professor. Are they trauma-informed? They’re probably not.”

## Call to repentance

Nash said any first responder to abuse should be well-equipped.

“We don’t want to make this terrible situation any worse for a victim or a survivor,” Nash said.



Abuse survivor Rachael Denhollander discusses the Southern Baptist Convention’s history of addressing sexual abuse with Ethics & Religious Liberty Commission President Russell Moore at the Caring Well

conference. (Karen Race  
Photography / RNS)

Denhollander said institutions, including faith-based ones, should worry less about reputation and more about repentance.

“If we truly believe in the power of repentance and the importance of truth, then our Christian institutions should be the first to repent of where we have erred,” she said. “We should be the first to acknowledge and pursue the truth when it looks like something might have been handled wrong. But more often than not the immediate response is to clamp down and protect liability and reputation at the expense of the victim and justice.”

Both Denhollander and Nash have addressed questions of sex abuse in the Southern Baptist Convention as it has started grappling with reports of abuse. At a Southern Baptist conference in October that focused on sexual abuse, Denhollander criticized that denomination’s leaders for not doing enough to aid abuse survivors and urged an independent review “not only of the abuses that occurred, but why those abuses were covered up.”

Nash has worked with the SBC, leading a team involved in an external review of its International Mission Board’s handling of sexual harassment and child abuse allegations.