

Sex abuse expert says churches not following Christ

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IRVING—Psychologist Diane Langberg learned a valuable lesson from her father long before she became an expert on trauma and sexual abuse—a painful lesson with profound spiritual implications.

Her father, a World War II bomber pilot, stayed in the military after the war. However, an undiagnosed neurological condition eventually forced his retirement.

He soon needed around-the-clock care and couldn't stand on his own. His head was directing his body, but his body wasn't listening and eventually wasn't able to support life.

She watched the illness unfold and drew a lesson from it.



A woman holds signs about abuse during a rally outside the annual meeting of the Southern Baptist Convention at the Birmingham-Jefferson Convention Complex on June 11, 2019, in Birmingham, Ala.

(RNS photo by Butch Dill)

"A body that doesn't follow its head is a very sick body," said Langberg, author of *Redeeming Power: Understanding Authority and Abuse in the Church* and clinical professor at the Global Trauma Recovery Institute of Biblical Theological Seminary in Hatfield, Penn.

After controversies over sexual abuse in the Christian community—from the Roman Catholic Church, to the Southern Baptist Convention, to Ravi Zacharias International Ministries—Langberg now sees the same sickness at work in the church, the body of Christ.

"The church of Jesus Christ has a head. Our head has called for us to follow him. We are not doing that," Langberg told the B.H. Carroll Theological Institute's fall colloquy in Fort Worth Nov. 14-15. "Sexual abuse in Christian organizations is the king of oxymorons."

Sexual trauma deep and widespread

The problem of sexual trauma is deep and worldwide, Langberg said. One of three females will be beaten or coerced into sex in their lifetime, many times by someone they know. According to the United Nations, nearly three quarters of women in some areas of the world will be raped.

Sexual trauma also affects men. Alcohol and drug abuse by male sexual abuse victims is 25 times higher than normal. The rate of suicide is 12 times higher.

The church's goal, she said, should be to bring those hurting from silence to speaking, from isolation to community, and from a place of no hope to hope. That takes "talking, tears and time," Langberg said.

Victims need to speak to heal, even if they cannot fully articulate their

experience, she said. Their stories may come out in pieces without a beginning, a middle and an end. They may not make sense to those who are hearing them at first. They may also seem to the larger public unbelievable, especially when the one accused is a prominent and church leader.

But accusations rarely are false, Langberg said. In her 50-year-long career, she has uncovered only two false complaints of sexual abuse.

"No one wants to come to you to tell you they have been sexually abused," she said. "If they do, you should listen. We cannot rely on what we hope to be true."

Silenced by the system

Unfortunately, when a victim does come forward, they are most often met with the power of a system that feels threatened. The system unites to remove the threat by silencing the accuser, who is made to believe speaking about the abuse will destroy the work of God.

Likewise, the religious system remains silent about an abuser.

"Silence is a double vice," she said. "It shows indifference to the victims, and it is complicity with the destroyers."

Sexual abuse requires deception and produces coercion by the system. The deception begins on the part of the one who has committed the abuse. He or she has not only deceived the victim and others. There is self-deception involved in the failure to recognize a heart so deeply infected with sin, Langberg said.

Then the system gathers its forces and begins to make the victim feel responsible. Questions about how an accusation will affect the church make the victim carry both the burden of abuse and the weight of the church's reputation.

“One of the most powerful weapons of deception is the use of spiritual language,” Langberg said.

When sexual abuse has been exposed, the response of the Christian community often has been naïve, she said.

“The exposure of something true is not going to destroy what God is doing,” she said. “If you lose the capacity to tell the truth, you become a slave to the sin.”

Slavery to sin has produced in the church a poor understanding of grace and a corrupted pathway of repentance. Many churches, Langberg said, accept tears and a simple plea for forgiveness when an abuser is confronted and confesses. They seek to move on, often with the abuser and abused only pews apart.

True repentance is a process

Instead of confessions and promises to “never do it again,” the church should understand repentance as a lifelong process—a slow, consistent change over time. Its genuineness cannot be discerned for a long time.

“To remove someone from a pulpit is a grace. It is a keen awareness that their sensibility to sin is so damaged they cannot recognize it,” she said. Removing the abuser from that position is a protection for him, as well as for the flock.

Churches can avoid many of the problems associated with sexual abuse by learning key lessons. First, the abuse of minors and sexual abuse is always, everywhere an illegal act, in all 50 states, Langberg said.

Second, discerning the truth and accuracy of an accusation is not the function of the church. It is the function of law enforcement. The first step church leaders must take when confronted with abuse, Langberg said, is

the call to the police.

Third, while “clergy sexual abuse” is not a crime in all 50 states, it is important to recognize the phrase “it was an affair” should carry no weight with the church. A pastor having a sexual relationship with a congregant is abuse, because he is in a position of authority. Likewise, the church should reject excuses such as the pastor being enticed by the dress or appearance of a congregant.

God doesn't desire 'form over substance'

Another lesson the church must learn is God's kingdom is not an institutional structure.

“He doesn't desire form over substance,” Langberg said. “I believe God would rather see these things fall down flat than continue hiding these sins.”

Finally, the church needs to recognize that hurting the sheep breaks the heart of the Shepherd. The church's allegiance is not to a system. Its allegiance is to its head—Christ.

“I fear we have revered the system more than God. ...Our thinking is whatever we do to preserve what we love in our life is good, blind to the fact it looks nothing like him.”

Langberg urged churches to keep a watchful eye over the sheep, and to avoid selecting leaders based on talent and gifting rather than integrity. The ability of a minister to eloquently articulate theological truth does not mean that person is an obedient servant of Christ, she said.

“Many have fed off the vulnerable sheep under their care. But sheep do not

eat sheep," she said. "Wolves eat sheep."