

Commentary: How churches can respond to child abuse

November 12, 2024

In my [previous article](#), I discussed institutional abuse reform initiatives. However, the reality of church autonomy leaves local churches ultimately responsible for reform.

Background checks and interviews are a good start, but they are not enough to protect children from predators.

Churches are spaces that provide people access to children. The reality is [93 percent of abusers identify as religious](#). When one couples this statistic with the reality abusers are master manipulators, an abuser may not only be religious but may come across as spiritually mature.

Preliminary measures are a start, but securing accountability measures that apply to every church member is even better.

The Southern Baptist Convention's Abuse Reform Implementation Task Force suggests a possibility that "25 percent of the average church congregation has [likely experienced abuse](#)." The stakes are high.

As I tell each member who undergoes child care training, "we don't do thorough screening and training because we are *untrusting*, but because we have been *entrusted* with the most precious commodity—children." This is a doctrinal concern.

Doctrine vs. abuse

So how can we communicate to our congregations that abuse is a doctrinal concern? I have provided a list to start the conversation. What God says

and what abuse says could not be further apart.

1. Anthropology:

- **God says** children are made in his image, fearfully and wonderfully made, loved by God.
- **Abuse says** children are sexual objects, punching bags, puppets to be controlled, a means to an end.

2. Christology:

- **Jesus says** to have childlike faith, and if anyone harms his little ones, it would be better for a millstone to be hung around their neck and thrown into the sea (Matthew 18:6).
- **Abuse says** childlikeness and innocence are to be exploited, manipulated and destroyed.

3. Theology:

- **God says** he is a God of justice, compassion, care, tenderness, our heavenly Father.
- **Abuse done** in God's name is blasphemy. It distorts people's view of God, making him seem vindictive, aloof, controlling, uncaring or even dangerous.

4. Hamartiology (doctrine of sin):

- **God says** abusers and rapists should be held accountable and punished for their actions. God even commanded to execute rapists but to protect victims (Deuteronomy 22:25-26).
- **Abuse convinces** the survivor they are the wrongdoer, that somehow they deserve to be inhumanly treated, that they should be ashamed of who they are rather than see themselves as children of God.

5. Public theology and ecclesiology:

- **God says** we must bring sin into the light, that we must hold lawbreakers accountable and that the church is not a legal body.
- **Abuse says** sin should be kept in the dark, that apologies without making amends are enough and that the church is accountable to no one but itself.

Creating safe spaces

So how do we set fire to the god of Molech and smash his altars? We do so by claiming kingdom territory in our classrooms, on our playgrounds and at our youth retreats. Every child care space must become holy ground where Jesus' heart for children becomes ours: "Let the little children come to me and do not hinder them" (Matthew 19:14).

Here are some basic starting points for local churches to establish safe sanctuaries:

1. Appoint a **child safety coordinator**. If no one can do it, you need to be the coordinator. From there, you can build a **child safety team** tasked with enforcing and updating policy, as well as being the go-to child care helpers.
2. Educate your child care team and church about your state's **mandatory reporter training**. Each state has its own training on how to do a proper report in the event of an emergency.
3. Create a list of **safe sanctuary policies** for child care workers, such as the two-adult rule. No child should be left alone with an adult on church premises or at church-sponsored events.
4. Pray over every classroom that it would be a safe sanctuary and kingdom territory. Pray that the church's ministry would lead to children loving Jesus and that his little ones would be protected from ravenous wolves.

It is imperative to ensure your church agrees to enforce safe sanctuary as a covenant community. Show that your church cares. Create a safe community. Start by appointing a person, then build a team, then build a safe community. It is not a matter of politics or policy; it is a matter of doctrine. The life and faith of our kids depend on child abuse prevention.

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