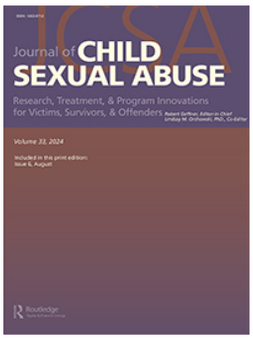

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A Forgotten Millstone: Denialism and Child Abuse in the Christian Church

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ABSTRACT

Christianity was founded on the teachings of Jesus, whose words emphasize protecting and honoring children. Jesus' teachings are historically unique for the period with his emphasis on safeguarding children, but the church moved away from this focus. First century Christianity adopted protections for children and harsh consequences for those who would abuse a child. Over time, much of Christianity lost this focus. Now, churches at every level experience countless scandals. More churches have begun addressing this crisis, but many resist accountability and prevention efforts. They minimize, deny, and oppose survivors, causing deep wounds. This umbrella review examines public resources and the authors' experience and expertise to assess the prevalence, risks, and effects of abuse and denialism within Christian communities. It synthesizes insight from multiples sources to inform this analysis. Despite the forces of denialism in many Christian communities, voices are rising, demanding safeguards and accountability. This chorus, led by survivors, gives hope that denialism in the Christian church may one day be overcome. Although this articles focuses on Christian churches, similar issues affect most religions.

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Introduction: denialism defined: deliberate indifference

Anthropologist Didier Fassin distinguishes between denial, defined as "the empirical observation that reality and truth are being denied," and denialism, which he defines as "an ideological position whereby one systematically reacts by refusing reality and truth" (Didier, 2006, p. 115).

In a court of law, "ostrich instructions" inform a jury on "knowledge" as it relates to mens' area (criminal intent) for a criminal case (Robbins, 1990). Courts have long held that actual knowledge is the same as deliberate ignorance, meaning that if a defendant buries their head in the sand to avoid knowledge, this may suffice as knowledge. One writer argues that denialism is not merely denial: "To be in denial is to know at some level. To be a denialist

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is to never have to know at all. Denialism is a systematic attempt to prevent challenge and acknowledgment; to suggest that there is nothing to acknowledge. Whereas denial is at least subject to the possibility of confrontation with reality, denialism can rarely be undermined by appeals to face the truth" (Khan-Harris, 2018, para. 30).

Dr. Jennifer Freyd developed DARVO as a tool for understanding the tactics that abusers and institutions may deploy in the wake of efforts for accountability (Freyd, 1997; Harsey & Freyd, 2017; P & Freyd, 2014; Smidt & Freyd, 2018; Smith & Freyd, 2013). DARVO stands for Deny, Attack, Reverse Victim and Offender. DARVO tactics are also used by those in the church as a form of denialism. Sometimes this is a misguided attempt to protect the institution of the church or the denyer from the hurt of such a deep betrayal as a form of "betrayal blindness" (Freyd & Birell, 2013). Betrayal blindness is a form of denial and a strategy to protect oneself from the pain of deep betrayal. These tactics are frequently experienced by survivors as an extremely damaging form of institutional betrayal, often having revictimizing effects.

Pamela Cooper-White states that there is "overwhelming evidence that the public, and even educated professionals, profess to want to know the truth [about child abuse], but that, in fact, they do not want to know" (Cooper-White, 2017, p. 173). In environments that reject the truth about child abuse and its victims, the pressure to ignore it or mislabel it is profound (Cooper-White, 2012).

When an institution engages in denialism, it engages in practices utilized by perpetrators against victims. Rather than grapple with reality, institutions deny horrific things could happen to them, their spouses, children, friends, or others they care about. Instead, they speak the truth they would rather hear: "It didn't happen, It's all in her mind. It wasn't that bad" (Cooper-White, 2017). When this occurs, "it is in the perpetrators' interests to enlist the denial of bystanders and to marginalize the voices of victims as part of a larger pattern of power and privilege at the expense of the oppressed" (Cooper-White).

This article argues that Christian institutions have engaged in denialism when it comes to confronting child abuse (Regulars, 2010). Many attempted to sound the alarm on widespread sexual abuse in the Church decades ago, but they were often met with disbelief Others in the community, including leaders and organizations. With the onslaught of child abuse cases that have come to the public forefront in recent years, knowledge that child sexual abuse (CSA) is a problem within the church is now difficult to deny.

Kanakuk, a Christian sports camp in Missouri, allegedly covered up many cases of CSA. Nancy French, who investigated Kanakuk Camp extensively, recalled, "I started digging into it and realizing that many of the camp leaders, including the ones that are still running the camp today, were aware of a lot of this abusive behavior and looked the other way – not only looked the other

way, but promoted [the abuser] repeatedly" (Wicentowski, 2022, para. 3). Chi Alpha, a Christian Fraternity affiliated with the Assembly of God denomination, reportedly had a registered sex offender affiliated with its ministry who has been arrested for violations of CSA (Shellnutt, 2023a).

These incidents raise important questions. What did the institution know about the abuse? Did they know or should they have known abuse was occurring in their midst? Did they take an ostrich-like stance and bury their head in the sand, deliberately remaining ignorant of the abuse? Did they look away so they would not have all the information needed to stop the abuse from occurring? Denialism in a church, while just as important as denialism within a secular institution, carries more weight. Truth-telling and truth-seeking are some of the very tenets of the Christian faith. Denialism must be confronted as it is the precursor to poor institutional responses to abuse. Christian institutions, as institutions in other faith systems, have a moral duty to detect and correct denialism within their midst.

Denialism is rejecting truth. This can occur through words, actions, or inactions. This article will use references from public resources and the experience and expertise of the authors to assess how institutional denialism in faith institutions exist. It will assess tactics of denialism used among faith institutions when confronted with allegations of child abuse: false security; minimization; misapplication of scripture; and authority and governance. While denialism occurs in every faith system, the authors' expertise pertains to Christianity, and this article will therefore focus on addressing concerns within that faith system (Bonab, Miner, & Proctor, 2013.; Berkovits, 2017; O'Leary et al., n.d.).

Prevalence, risks and impact of denialism of child abuse in the Christian Church

Catholic church sexual abuse

A far greater volume of information on abuse in the Catholic Church is available than for any other faith tradition (Lytton, 2008). The sexual abuse of children by Catholic priests or deacons has happened throughout the world (D'Antonio, 2013; Doyle & Rubina, 2003). There is reason to believe the sexual abuse of children by Catholic clergy dates back to the earliest days of the Catholic church (Doyle & Rubina, 2003; Doyle et al., 2006). In the eleventh century, Saint Peter Damian expressed deep concerns about the sexual abuse of children by Catholic priests (Doyle & Rubina, 2003). The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops chose the years 1950–2010 for analysis in two separate studies by researchers at John Jay College. The first study focused on the scope of sexual abuse by priests and deacons, and the second attempted to

address the "causes and context" of the scandal (Terry et al., 2011; United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2004).

Though the two John Jay studies have been criticized by survivors and victim advocates and other researchers note the extent of abuse during this period is undercounted, the findings still provide a framework for analyzing the extent of sexual abuse within the Church (D'Antonio, 2013; Lytton, 2008).

In the first study, researchers concluded the sexual abuse of children by Catholic clergy was "widespread" with every region of the United States averaging between 3% and 6% of their priests accused of sexual abuse (United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2004). By 2012, American Catholic bishops counted more than 6,100 priests as credibly accused of sexually abusing children since 1950—which accounted for 5.6% of the total priests serving during that period (D'Antonio, 2013).

There are at least two reasons to believe the actual numbers are higher. First, the information provided was based in part on personnel files which may have been incomplete or had records removed (Lytton, 2008). In several dioceses a "case-by-case check of claims against priests" brought the number to as high as 10% (D'Antonio, 2013). There are also documented instances of inaccurate record-keeping or even the destruction of evidence. For example, a Philadelphia Cardinal once ordered the destruction of a memo listing the names of 34 priests accused of sexually abusing children (D'Antonio). Second, the John Jay research was only of known allegations. Since many victims never disclose abuse, the "number of allegations is lower than the number of actual incidents" (Lytton). Depending on the study, 60–80% of sexually abused children do not disclose their victimization until adulthood with the figures even higher for boys (Alaggia, 2010; Orbbins et al., 1990).

Within the Catholic Church during the period in question, numerous additional factors may have contributed to delayed disclosure. Nearly all the victims were "raised in devout Catholic families" with "strong ties to the Church as well as individual clergy members" (Doyle & Rubina, 2003). Reverence for the church, or at least a close affiliation with Catholicism, served the cause of silence. For many children and their families, there was a fear that rebellion against the church would bring eternal consequences (D'Antonio, 2013). When children or their parents did make a complaint, intimidation of victims and their families by church leaders also served to keep the abuse secret (Doyle & Rubina, 2003). Children may also fail to perceive that they have been victimized until later (Effects, n.d..).

Since the publication of the John Jay College studies, there have been a series of state attorney-general studies of the prevalence of CSA within Catholicism. These include Nebraska, Iowa, and a two-year grand jury investigation in Pennsylvania which culminated in a report exceeding 1,300 pages (Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, 2023; Office of the Nebraska Attorney

General, 2021). Each found the sexual abuse of children within the Catholic church to be widespread.

Protestant church sexual abuse

In 2007, the Church Mutual Insurance Company, the GuideOne Insurance Company and Brotherhood Mutual Insurance Company informed the Associated Press that they received annually approximately 260 reports of child sexual abuse within major Protestant denominations in the United States (The Associated Press, 2007).

In 2019, reporters from the Houston Chronicle and San Antonio Express-News published a series of articles on sexual abuse within the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC), the largest Protestant denomination in the United States. The journalists found approximately 380 clergy and other SBC leaders and volunteers who were alleged to have committed sexual abuse against children and adults impacting more than 700 victims (Downen et al., 2019).

Protestants have also seen scandals in New Tribes Mission, the Christian Missionary Alliance, ABWE, Bob Jones University, Liberty University, and among numerous Christian denominations who supported a missionary school in Nigeria where multiple children were abused (Arauio-Hawkings, 2022; Dreyfus, 2023; Perez-Pena, 2014; Solarly & Westphal, 2008; Stier et al., 2010, 2014; Zylstra, 2016) Christian radio host Janet Mefferd contended, "This is an epidemic going on in churches . . . When are evangelicals going to wake up and say we have a massive problem in our own churches" (Joyce, 2014, para. 2)? While there is a temptation to say that abuse is more common in more conservative churches, this also is a form of denialism. More progressive churches also face an epidemic of abuse that must be acknowledged and addressed.

Risk factors for Denialism of Child sexual abuse within Christendom

Four overarching risk factors are the foundation of denialism of child sexual abuse within the Christian community. These factors are detailed below.

The Christian community has largely failed to address theologically the sin of sexual abuse and the scriptural prioritization of children

With respect to the longstanding child sexual abuse crisis within the Catholic church, one commentator writes: "The only way to adequately address the causes and legacies of clergy sexual abuse is through deep and sustained structural and theological reform" (Wheatley & McCabe, 2023, para. 10). Fr Hans Zollner, SJ, concludes that "ecclesial reactions to sexual abuse have often lacked regard for the child: it seems evident that the church at all levels of the [Catholic] scandal have turned a blind eye to minors or sees them merely as

objects. In a similar vein, many theological reactions to the scandals have not concentrated on the child" (Zollner, 2019, p. 692). Zollner finds the theological engagement with child abuse to be "sobering," and laments "there is little Christian – much less Catholic – teaching or theological ethics focused on children per se" (Zollner, 2019).

This lack of focus on the child is bolstered by many theological beliefs surrounding parental and adult authority. The risk in this teaching is that when children do take the brave step of coming forward with disclosures of abuse, they are discredited and disbelieved. This is an overarching risk factor in institutional denialism. It is easier to believe that a child is wrong than to wrestle through the reality that a trusted adult harmed a child.

A lack of theological engagement is also the norm for the Protestant church (Crisp, 2021;). To the extent theology is employed at all in cases of child abuse, it is employed poorly, even cruelly. The Caring Well report, composed by an advisory group assembled by the Southern Baptist Convention, noted the role of poor theology in contributing to the abuse of children and adults in that Protestant denomination (Vieth, 2023a; Well, 2019). The Caring Well report noted that the Biblical teaching that all are created in God's image was undermined as a result of "neglect to properly care for women, children, and the least of these as modeled by our Savior (Matt. 18:6; John 4:26) (Well, 2019). Abusers and organizations have gone so far as saying abuse allegations are an attack from Satan or that those reporting abuse are damning people to an eternity in hell, both theological fallacies that have a chilling effect on those who have been abused (Guidepost Solutions, 2022; Stier et al., 2010). Failure to recognize abuse within the Holy Scriptures and to preach it from the pulpit aids in denialism tactics (Singer, 2023).

Lack of seminary education and theological understanding of child abuse

A significant reason for no or for poor theological engagement with any aspect of child abuse, is the lack of seminary training on this topic. Prior to the scandal, no SBC seminary had a course focused on CSA and, even now, only one of the SBC seminaries has implemented a course (Vieth, 2023a). This is not unique to the SBC – nearly all Christian seminaries lack rigorous education on child abuse. The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) is the nation's largest Lutheran denomination. In 2022, at its national churchwide assembly, the ELCA acknowledged that few of its pastors have been trained at the seminary level or elsewhere to minister to survivors of child abuse" (Vieth, 2023b).

Cognitive dissonance has played a significant role in Christian denialism

"Cognitive dissonance" is a phenomenon in which "people may alter their beliefs and behavior or seek to discredit and reject the conflicting evidence" (Berkovits, 2017, p. 11). For example, the abuse offender is often someone

known to the community, such as a family member, a long-standing friend or a respected religious pastor or lay leader. In contemplating all the good attributes of the accused offender a parishioner has personally experienced, the congregant resists contrary evidence. Those who commit sexual offenses "report exploiting this tendency by intentionally situating themselves at the center of the community, as generous, kind, learned, and pious leaders, who are truly exemplars in every way. Their sexual abuse behind closed doors thus remains hidden with the victims, and the community often refuses to accept allegations that may eventually emerge" (Berkovits, 2017, p. 12). A clergy person who molested 96 children told a sex offender treatment provider:

> They [church leaders and congregants] immediately rallied to my defense . . . They said, "We know this young man . . . He has been in our community all of his life. We know his parents, his grandparents, his aunts, his uncles. This is not something he would do. This is not something that goes along with behavior that we see in him day in and day out," and that was true because I was very careful that they did not see that behavior day in and day out (Berkovits, 2017, p. 13).

As a result of cognitive dissonance, many members of the community adopt an "all or nothing" thinking which assumes a perpetrator is a monster or someone who is "all bad." Thus, they fail to recognize that an offender may, in fact, have done many good things while simultaneously committing sexual offenses or engaging in other misconduct (Berkovits, 2017). This problem may be particularly acute when an offender vigorously denies the allegations. As Dr. Judith Herman writes:

> After every atrocity one can expect to hear the same predictable apologies: it never happened; the victim lies; the victim exaggerates; the victim brought it upon herself; and in any case it is time to forget the past and move on. The more powerful the perpetrator, the greater is his prerogative to name and define reality, and the more completely his arguments prevail. (Berkovits, 2017, p. 18)

Although cognitive dissonance has been discussed in the academic literature dating back to the 1950s most faith leaders have little or no understanding of this concept (Berkovits, 2017). As a result, the problem of cognitive dissonance continues to harm victims, embolden offenders, and play a role in denialism to instances of abuse (Berkovits, 2017).

Despite widespread scandals, the Christian church continues to lack high-quality child-protection policies

A study of religious communities in the United Kingdom concluded that "despite an abundance of available guidance, there is significant variation in levels of compliance [in implementing policies] among religious organizations and settings. Some settings, despite serving large congregations, do not have even basic child protection procedures in place. Even where such policies are in place, some victim and survivor organizations have referred to "disguised

compliance' whereby organizations are primarily concerned to give the impression of having in place effective child protection procedures whilst the reality is one of half-hearted or non-existent implementation" (Jay et al., 2021, p. 7). Even when policies are in place and enforced, they are often developed by lawyers, insurance providers, and others that may prioritize protecting the institution over safeguarding and caring for people (Tchividjian & Berkovits, 2017).

An analysis of the written child protection policies of the 32 Catholic archdioceses in the United States found the "average score for all 32 archdioceses in the general area of prevention was 40.7 out of 102 possible points or 40%. There is much variation between archdioceses with few policies conforming to basic best practices that would be expected of a youth-serving organization" (Dallam et al., 2021, p. 901).

The Evangelical Lutheran Church of American (ELCA) has approximately 9,000 congregations and more than 3 million baptized members (Vieth, 2023b). Despite these large numbers and thus the risk of abuse among the faithful, the ELCA acknowledged in 2022 "there has been no comprehensive address or guidance across the ELCA" on responding to child abuse and that it "seems clear that few rostered ministers or congregations are aware of or require best practices" (Vieth, 2023b, pp. 75–76). The ELCA said that "'safe church' policies are rare in congregations" and that it is "unlikely that most congregations require background checks for lay staff and volunteers even though many belong to the category of mandated reporters" (Vieth, 2023b, p. 76) "Based on the sporadic address and minimal resources" used within their denomination, the ELCA concluded, "there seems to be a clear need for addressing as a church the matter of child abuse and childhood protection" (Vieth, 2023b, p. 76).

A 2018 survey of Mennonite Church USA congregations found these churches were "more proactive in child protection practices than in 2010" with churches who had implemented a policy more likely to provide training and to have a clear plan for reporting abuse to the authorities than churches without a policy (Harder & Wilder, 2021). Whether or not a congregation had a policy, less than half of the congregations "had incorporated a child protection theme into worship in the past 12 months" (Harder & Wilder, 2021).

Spiritual Impact of Denying or Ignoring child abuse in the church

Abuse or neglect not only impacts a child physically and emotionally; it also impacts a child spiritually (Felitti & Anda, 2010; Felitti & Anda, 2010; Russell, 2018). Although academics differentiate between religiosity and spirituality, most laypersons consider them to be interchangeable terms (Russell, 2018). However, the term is defined, child abuse often impacts a child's sense of spirituality. For example, in a study of 527 male victims of child maltreatment, researchers found significant spiritual injuries, including feelings of guilt,

anger, grief, despair, fear of death, and a belief that God is unfair (Lawson et al., 1998).

When the perpetrator is a member of the clergy or otherwise closely connected to the child's faith tradition, the spiritual impact may be particularly pronounced (McLaughlin, 1994; Pargament et al., 2008). Researchers have found that "religion-related abuse has significantly more negative implications for its victims' long-term psychological well-being" than similar abuse not inflicted in the name of God (Bottoms et al., 2004, pp. 87–88). One study finds that victims of clergy abuse are 4 times more likely than children abused by a family member to see their beliefs in God negatively impacted by abuse. This was a "significant predictor" for experiencing a number of mental health challenges including a doubling of the risk of suicidality (Pereda et al., 2022). Some research suggests the spiritual impact of clergy abuse may have nuanced differences depending on the child's faith tradition (Collines et al., 2014; Gall et al., 2007; Krinkin et al., 2021).

Denialism through false security

One tactic employed by Christian institutions, albeit often unintentionally, is denialism through false security. False sense of security is "a feeling of being safer than one really is" (Merriam-Webster, n.d..). False security gives institutions the impression they are invincible. However, false security overlooks institutional blind spots which create vulnerability for abuse to occur. Some factors that lead to a false sense of security surrounding abuse include: enacted policies and procedures, misplaced confidence in leadership, the misunderstanding that abuse does not happen in Christian environments, and the inaccurate belief that an offender who has "repented" will not reoffend (Ad Interim Committee, 2019; Macini, 2022; Parton & Wattam, 1999). Faith institutions are safer when they have adequate training, prevention, evaluation and intervention policies and procedures, and awareness of abuse dynamics. However, steps to secure preventative measures may give institutions a false sense of security that their policies will prevent abuse from occurring inside their walls, especially when these preventative measures are not monitored or do not adequately meet best practice standards (Parton & Wattam, 1999; Smietana, 2018). Every institution must grapple with the reality that while it may have preventative and awareness measures in place, abuse still occurs, whether inside or outside its walls.

Institutions must understand that abuse does occur within Christian institutions and that predatory individuals sit within their pews and stand in their pulpits. One study of professional/institutional perpetrators found that "15% of the "professional perpetrators" chose

their occupation (e.g. clergy, teaching, child care) exclusively so that they could sexually abuse children and a further 41.5% admitted this was part of

their motivation" (Sullivan & Beech, 2004, p. 41). This highlights the importance of understanding offender dynamics and confronting cognitive dissonance on a personal and institutional level. While institutional leaders may believe that Christians are in safer environments, becoming aware of grooming and offender dynamics can help alleviate a false sense that just because someone claims to be a Christian, they are safe.

Similarly, false security exists by a confidence that Church leaders will maintain due diligence to keep institutions safe. While scriptures put the responsibility on pastoral leadership to protect the flock and create an environment of safety, an alarming statistic stated that around 50% of pastors do not have adequate training in how to address sexual and domestic violence (Parkinson, 2014). In order for institutions to truly be safe, awareness, prevention, and responses must be adequate at all levels of membership and must begin with the top leadership.

Finally, Christians often feel their institutions are safe due to theological views on grace and forgiveness. Often Christians will extend grace and forgiveness to those who cause harm. They wrongly assume that if someone "repents" of the sin of abuse, they will no longer engage in the abusive behavior. Unfortunately, data tells a different story (Satler, 2003). Therefore, leaders should avoid denialism by holding offenders accountable to create a safe environment. These points highlight the importance of institutional denialism through false security by gleaning wisdom from historical cases and adequately preparing to respond to abuse in the wake of a crisis.

Denialism through misapplication of scripture

The Bible holds a powerful place in all Christian traditions as Holy Scriptures, but the Bible has commonly been used in the service of denialism and other forms of harm. Most striking of this is abuse itself. Many survivors have testified that their abuser in a Christian setting used the Bible as a tool of grooming to manipulate, control, shame, guilt, threaten, excuse, keep silent or other nefarious purpose in the abuse itself, often resulting in spiritual abuse (Brown, 2009; Smietana, 2018). One of the main reasons Christian traditions have failed to effectively prevent and respond to abuse is the failure to address abuse theologically, including through the teachings of Holy Scripture. In this vacuum, it is easier for the twisting of the scriptures to hold power when an abuser deploys them to abuse. Tragically, survivors of abuse have also routinely faced misapplications of scripture in the wake of abuse by leaders and others within the church (Singer, 2023). Faith adherents and leaders must wrestle with common misapplications of sacred texts to safeguard against further harm for survivors of child abuse.

In some cases, the scriptures are also used by abusers and others within the church in ways that go beyond a misapplication. At times, an abuser or

a Christian institution has used scripture as a part of an intentional tactic to insulate the abuser and/or the institution from accountability. Many of the misuses of the Bible make sense in light of an abuser or an unhealthy church system deploying DARVO tactics, rather than an unintentional misapplication. For example, when a powerful pastor, who holds tremendous amounts of formal and informal power, uses DARVO tactics, it often silences any further attempts for formal accountability. Churches and their leaders should avoid the use of DARVO tactics and the utilization of scripture as an aid (Guidepost Solutions, 2022; Stier et al., 2014; Wicentowski, 2022). Instead, churches should seek to show institutional courage to hold those who abuse power accountable. Below are common misapplications of scripture utilized in denialism.

Pressuring to forgive

Many survivors of abuse in the church have heard messages that the Bible requires them to forgive quickly and move on (Cooper-White, 2017). Some leaders are beginning to understand how forgiveness has been cheapened and misapplied: "[Archbishop Davies of the Anglican Diocese of Sydney] acknowledged that 'what has happened in the past is that there has been easy forgiveness, or shall I say cheap forgiveness, whereby a person has been forgiven thinking it is not going to happen again . . . we too easily forgave'" (Australian Royal Commission, 2017b, p. 750). The damage caused by this is incalculable. Survivors cannot feel fully safe to come forward when their experiences are minimized and when they are pressured to quickly forgive as this is "the Christian thing to do" (Australian Royal Commission, 2017b). For some survivors, this spiritual pressure led to compounded trauma to the point of suicidal ideation (Stier et al., 2014). Others reported a similar heavy toll, including, "physical pain or illness, fear of hell, and exacerbated feelings of failure" (Stier et al., 2014, p. 101). Many survivors also felt a heavy weight of shame and blame based on how forgiveness was seen as a requirement from the Bible (Stier et al., 2014).

The SBC Caring Well Report noted a "misapplication of confession, repentance, and forgiveness of sin" (Well, 2019, p. 20). In an effort to "restore peace and harmony," the report found SBC clergy and others had "rushed through" the need for repentance and that this often served "the interests of the perpetrator over the person who has suffered abuse at his or her hands" (Well, 2019). Moreover, the theological misapplication of confession and repentance resulted in a failure "to go straight to civil authorities" and allow them to conduct an investigation. Those who do not forgive quickly have been wrongly attacked as the problem in the situation, rather than the abuser. As a survivors emailed one of the authors, "As a survivor that sits in a pew at church, it is hard to be there knowing that many of us have been looked at as the problem, rather than the victim. It changed how many view God, and

many turned away from the faith because it is hard to believe in someone who 'allowed' this to happen or in some cases were told God wanted the priest or pastor to do this to them" (Anonymous, personal communication, March 14, 2023). Some recall hearing that they "have a part of the sin" of the abuse and that they must "forgive and forget" (Stier et al., 2014). Some recall hearing that if they did not "immediately forgive," they were "being rebellious against God" (Stier et al., 2014). This "ethic of instant forgiveness" has served as the method and final goal of any healing process (Cooper-White, 2017). Rushing forgiveness or pushing it onto a survivor ignores "the fact that their abuse and their healing are as much a part of their lives as any of the other parts that may be more comfortable for us" (Cooper-White, 2017, p. 254). This push to forgive, even if done in the supposed best interest of the victim ultimately serves as denialism.

Using the Bible to encourage "in-house" responses

Many in the church, especially leaders, have encouraged child abuse to be handled "in-house" rather than being reported to appropriate civil authorities. In many cases, this was a violation of the law and left victims without necessary intervention and resources (Cooper-White, 2017). The Australian Royal Commission summarized church responses, saying: "It was a common practice of religious institutions in Australia to adopt 'in-house' responses when dealing with allegations of child sexual abuse. 'In-house' responses were characterized by a reluctance to report child sexual abuse to the civil authorities, the leaders of religious institutions preferring instead to respond to allegations within the institution" (Australian Royal Commission, 2017a). This approach was in some cases spiritualized as "the biblical way" (Brown, 2009). Christa Brown was told by her church leader, "It is better if you don't tell anyone else . . . .Just leave it in God's hands" (Brown, 2009, p. 23). Church leaders told members they should not report because they have a responsibility to protect the reputation of the church (Australian Royal Commission, 2017b). This contrasts with the Bible's statements that uphold the power of the civil authorities to punish those who do wrong. Even if the abuse is acknowledged internally, the lack of engagement with external authorities creates an external-facing denialism.

Grace offered leniency and shielded abusers from consequences

The predictable result from "in-house" responses is that many abusers in the church have been treated with incredible leniency. This can come in the form of extending grace and premature forgiveness to abusers. The Australian Royal Commission summarizes a range of treatment of offenders, "Across religious institutions in some cases, there was no response at all to allegations of CSA. In other cases, alleged perpetrators were treated with considerable leniency. Some alleged perpetrators were encouraged to resign from ministry. Some were

given warnings and remained in positions where they had access to children. Others were transferred between locations. In some cases, the leaders of institutions to which alleged perpetrators were transferred, or the communities which these institutions served, were not told of the risk to children" (Australian Royal Commission, 2017b, p. 247). This contrasts with the Bible's statements calling us to practice accountability first, before forgiveness (ESV, Luke 17:3). "Cheap grace" has meant few if any consequences or accountability: "I went to twelve years of chapel from seventh grade through grad school, so I have as much chapel as you can have. I never heard anyone say that the abuser needs to do anything" (Stier et al., 2014, p. 102). Failing to hold offenders accountable due to misapplied scriptural principles of grace and forgiveness results in ignoring and denying the safety of the community and victim's needs.

Forbidding "gossip"

Because the Bible teaches against "gossip," some survivors have been admonished for gossiping to silence them in the wake of abuse (Australian Royal Commission, 2017b). One survivor noted: "They put the blame on the abused. It made me feel guilty because if I did talk about it, then I haven't forgiven. And I felt I can't talk about it because if I did, then that is gossiping and ruining his life" (Stier et al., 2014, p. 100). In the Bible, the idea of "gossip" relates to intentional and malicious acts such as slander, not simply speaking up about your experience of abuse. The prohibition of gossip does not justify or condone denialism.

Using Matthew 18:15–17 to require confrontation

Matthew 18:15–17 has often been misapplied in the wake of abuse in the church (Stier et al., 2014). In the church it is often universalized as a requirement to go first to any person who has done harm. Some victims have been required to confront their abuser by leaders, even to the extent of being forced to describe the details of their abuse in the presence of their abuser, inflicting further trauma (Australian Royal Commission, 2017b).

Enforcing scriptural principles of confrontation in cases of criminal acts, especially child abuse, puts victims back in dangerous environments, retraumatizes, and is harmful to someone who has already been severely harmed. It should be said that Jesus would never say, "If a wolf violates a little lamb, step one is to send the little lamb back to the wolf." To the contrary, in John 10, Jesus calls leaders to step in and prevent a predator from accessing the vulnerable (ESV, John 10:11–15).

Some Christian denominations have encoded interpretations of Matthew 18 as the official response procedure in a Book of Church Order or abuse policies (Forty-Seventh General Assembly, 2019). Some traditions take the requirement of two or three witnesses mentioned in Matthew 18:16 and other biblical

passages in a strict literal sense such that the testimony of a single child witness could never result in disciplinary action by church leaders (Australian Royal Commission, 2017a). As so much CSA occurs without other witnesses, the result was "the organization's reliance on the two-witness rule put congregational elders in a position where they were unable to take disciplinary action against perpetrators even when they believed that allegations of child sexual abuse were true" (Australian Royal Commission, 2017b, p. 273).

Denialism through minimization

Denialism is frequently expressed through the minimization of abuse. This may take the form of fixation on or distortion of offense details and timing to frame the abuse as less severe or worthy of concern. It may also take place by discrediting a victim's statement as true. Survivors of abuse have faced disbelief, denial, and minimization in churches (Australian Royal Commission, 2017a; Guidepost Solutions, 2022). In Christian environments, this silencing is often based in basic Christian categories from the Bible on sin and forgiveness (Australian Royal Commission, 2017a). Often the denial and minimizing is based on viewing all forms of misconduct through the biblical category of sin. The SBC Caring Well Report noted the failure "to grasp the depravity of sin and its consequences" and concluded this failure resulted in "minimizing sin" and labeling sexual abuse as mere "mistakes" or "mess ups" (Well, 2019). This also resulted in "Blaming those who suffered abuse" through insensitive, even cruel inquiries such as "What were you wearing" (Well, 2019)? The report also noted that church leaders "often" responded to allegations of sexual abuse as if they were merely a "sin" such as "having an affair" as opposed to the crime they are (Well, 2019). As a result, child victims were required to "confront the abuser" and were asked or made to "accept an apology and 'forgive and forget'" the crimes committed against them (Well, 2019).

The Australian Commission also found " . . . there was a tendency to view child sexual abuse as a forgivable sin or a moral failing rather than a crime" (Australian Royal Commission, 2017a, p. 38). This framework lacks the nuance that while Christians may believe that all are sinners, child abuse is a particularly egregious sin that also constitutes a crime. Some Christian traditions emphasize that all sin is equal in that it separates the person from God. Viewing all sins as the same will inevitably have the consequence of minimizing the sin of abuse. This distorted thinking can move from "We are all sinners," to "we are all abused, and we are all abusers." With these categories, the reality of child abuse is obscured as a crime and a unique form of harm.

Denialism through minimization may occur even when individuals have direct knowledge of concerning behavior. For example, Australia's Royal Commission into Institutional Response to CSA reflects the dynamic of

individuals' denialism toward a colleague's or friend's ability to abuse a child resulting in "adults minimising or downplaying concerning or inappropriate behaviour they notice" (Australian Royal Commission, 2017b, p. 542). The social proximity between the minimizer and the offender generated a need to diminish the behavior's severity and an unwillingness "to recognise reportable behaviour for what it is." Offenders are aware of this dynamic and exploit it (Australian Royal Commission, 2017b; Satler, 2003).

Linguistic techniques for minimizing behavior include the use of language to trivialize, sanitize, level, and create distance. Minimizers trivialize behavior through euphemisms or other language that misattributes or implies a sense of playfulness or unseriousness to the relevant circumstances. They sanitize behavior through omission or misleading descriptors, to portray even criminal behavior in an ambiguous way. They level relationships and power differentials to mitigate the severity of behavior. They create temporal distance from the present to the timing of the acts. These techniques may be utilized by perpetrators of abuse directly, but often are voiced by institutional leadership, especially within entities that may face significant loss or complications as a result of abuse allegations.

Minimization by trivializing behavior is exemplified by the common refrain of socially accepted norms, such as "boys will be boys," when applied to abusive and criminal behavior (Sargent & Smith, 2017). The Final Report of the Royal Commission into Institutional Response to CSA includes several additional examples of minimization in its discussion of "institutional responses that minimize, dismiss or disbelieve the victim's account of the abuse" (Australian Royal Commission, 2017a, p. 104). In one of these, "the director responsible for overseeing schools in the area . . . described the abuse as 'kiddy fiddling'" and stated that he lacked the ability to address the situation (Australian Royal Commission, 2017a, p. 105). In addition to infantilizing or disarming terms, another form of trivialization occurs through comparison to an alleged greater spiritual harm that supposedly outweighs the harm of the abuse. For example, GRACE's investigation of New Tribes Mission (now Ethnos 360) uncovered statements by religious authority figures to missionary children disclosing extensive, ongoing abuse "that such complaints would hinder their parents' work and result in Africans going to hell," conveying to victims that "evangelizing the lost was more important than them as children" (Stier et al., 2010, p. 10). This incident of denialism was enforced through censorship of victims' letters to parents, "requiring them to remove any negative remarks about the [abusive] conditions and/or experiences" (Stier et al., 2010, p. 10).

These linguistic techniques often co-occur. For example, a pastor responded to allegations that he sexually assaulted a minor while he served as her youth pastor. This took the form of reading a written "apology" to the congregation for the fact that he "regretfully had a sexual incident" with a "high school

senior," "more than twenty years ago," but "took every step to respond in a biblical way" at the time of the "incident" (Woodson, 2018). The pastor prefaced his reading by telling the congregation, "I don't want reading this to minimize anything. I've never wanted to minimize anything about what's taken place" (WRAL News, 2018, 2:01). Following the remarks, the pastor received a standing ovation.

As noted above, these techniques are also voiced by institutional leadership. They reinforce similar or identical narratives and may work in coordination with perpetrator techniques. In the above example, prior to the pastor addressing the congregation, the senior pastor prepared the congregation by stating "Only love covers a multitude of sins" (WRAL News, 2018, The senior pastor then stated "love you" to the apologizing pastor, just before the apology commenced (WRAL News, 2018). Following public backlash, the senior pastor preached that "What happened 20 years ago is wrong. What is happening with bloggers and social media critics being so hateful is also wrong" (Relevant, 2018, para. 8). Institutions may engage in minimization more overtly depending on victims' vulnerability, identity, or other characteristics. The Royal Commission documented the ordeal of a child abuse victim in foster care who upon disclosing was told, "'Don't make trouble.'" The victim relayed, "'What [do] you mean, don't make trouble? This person is touching me, how [am] I making trouble'" (Australian Royal Commission, 2017a, p. 155)? When an institution's religious beliefs diverge significantly from those of victims, the nature of minimization may intensify (Cole & Harris, 2017).

Denialism through authority and governance

Denialism in the church is not simply instrumental. Those who insist that sexual violence against children and adults is not pervasive, is a problem largely confined to the past, or is in part the fault of the victims themselves, do not do so merely for the purpose of protecting church assets or demonstrating fealty to an authority-figure accused of wrongdoing. Rather, to acknowledge the scale and seriousness of sexual offending within the Christian churches is perceived by congregants and leaders alike – in some respects, correctly – as a fundamental challenge to these institutions' reason for existence. Both, therefore, are likely to collude in a discursive strategy that, if it does not actually challenge the veracity of the victim's account, nonetheless insists on its ultimate insignificance.

This accounts for the paradox that although the evidence is overwhelming that dysfunctional and maladaptive responses to sexual violence are embedded in the very structures of all the Christian churches, each continues to assert that the problem is one of individual failings alone (Death, 2015; Douglas, 2015; Gardner, 2021; Keenan, 2012). When offenses become too obvious to ignore, reference to the presence of "a few bad apples"

almost invariably follows, coupled with assurances that no more change is required than, at its most expansive, to update child-protection policies and procedures. To date, no Christian leadership organization has reflected seriously upon the astonishing uniformity – regardless of organizational, cultural, geographical, and theological differences – of the church's treatment of sexual abuse, and of those harmed by it. It is hard to find a denomination anywhere in the world that has taken meaningful steps in this respect without first having been compelled to do so by the civil authorities or the demands of insurance companies. That almost none can identify a senior member who has demonstrated leadership in the struggle against sexual violence, can hardly be coincidental. Yet, neither church officials nor the faithful in the pews have thought it necessary to consider why purely secular entities – rape crisis centers, law-enforcement agencies, academic research institutes, or state commissions of enquiry – have so consistently been in advance of professed Christians in the priority they have accorded to this problem and the compassion and concern they have demonstrated for those suffering from its effects.

A large part of the explanation lies in the fact that in many areas of life, Christian churches have become accustomed to exercising definitional authority with respect not just to questions of morality, but of reality. Enjoying among their members a presumption of being dedicated to truth no less than justice, their narrative-framing capability compared to that of victims is massively asymmetrical. Even when they concede that crimes have occurred, they normally possess the power to define their meaning, most typically as "isolated incidents" that say nothing about potential problems in the structure or culture of the churches involved. It is no accident that the few occasions on which this inherent advantage has been successfully overcome are when an entity possessing equal or greater institutional weight, like the Murphy and Ferns Inquiries in Ireland; the Sauvé Commission in France; the Pennsylvania Grand Jury in the United States; or a reputable, integrous, and public independent third party investigation is able to amplify the voices of victims to the point where broader questions about the implications of long-standing patterns of conduct can be asked (Buckley & Joyce, 2009, Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, n.d.; Independent Commission, 2021; Murphy et al., 2009).

This is exacerbated by the autonomy religious institutions in many countries are afforded both by society and the state. Religious institutions benefit from tax breaks, dispensations from certain requirements of civil law, and general sentiments of charity that makes accountability difficult and their power seem all encompassing. The SBC Caring Well Report noted the SBC doctrine of church autonomy "has been misunderstood in the context of sexual abuse within the church" (Well, 2019). The report noted that "leaders in some churches have provided cowardly cover for perpetrators and have claimed to be dispensing mercy while withholding it from victims … " In terms of reform, the report

stated that church autonomy "is a valid reason that some things can't be done, but it is not a valid reason that nothing should be done" (Well, 2019), p. 21.

Thus, the dynamic within Christian churches tends powerfully in the direction of denialism, such that in the absence of deliberate and purposeful actions taken to recognize and counter it, their construction of events will normally prevail. The degree of their leaders' and members' prior identification with the institution's basic trustworthiness, in contrast to the attitude of suspicion with which the victim's account is customarily met, ensures that other than in the most exceptional circumstances, unsettling questions about the former's record or about the need for systemic change will neither be answered nor asked. In their privileged access to information, financial assets, and professional assistance, churches will usually benefit from opinion-shaping resources that few victims will be able to match.

The temptation to exploit to the fullest this unequal relationship in the defense of an institution in whose success its members are deeply invested is a very understandable one. It is not surprising that so few have been able to resist yielding to it. Yet the consequences of doing so have been disastrous in the past and, if persistent, will have worse effects in the future. The human costs of institutional betrayal are even greater than those inflicted by individuals, and all the more so when it is perpetrated by an entity to which a person has learned to turn for trust, spiritual nurture and support (P & Freyd, 2014). The offense given to God by the victimization in His name of some of His most vulnerable children is also a consideration to which no Christian may be indifferent. But even from the most self-interested perspective, the stalwart refusal of churches to approach, far less surpass, the level of concern displayed by secular society for victims of sexual violence is unsustainable in either the short or long terms. Unless those outside the church are convinced that it cares about making reparation, to the extent that lies within its power, for the harm it has done in this regard, they are unlikely to hear anything else it may wish to say to them.

Hope rises: next steps

Denialism and its effects can be discouraging, especially when they are embedded in organizations and institutions that could be a profound source of safety and meaning making (Singer, 2018; Vieth & Singer, 2019). Despite this, there is a ray of hope. While some sectors of Christianity seem to be holding even more firmly to denialism, others are taking necessary steps to recognize, prevent, and respond to abuse. The hope that rises from the many churches that are making safeguarding children a priority is deeper than wishful thinking. It is a hope that rests on both the ability to see the goal and the commitment to remain on the path toward the goal, despite challenges that may come (Gwinn & Hellman, 2019). It is a hope that equips those who

hold it for the long journey ahead (Vieth, 2005). It is hope that must not be lost.

The goal that underpins this hope is the rise of churches and faith leaders who are equipped and committed to preventing abuse and responding well to those who have been impacted by abuse. Though many churches still deny abuse and its effects, more churches publicly acknowledge it as an evil that must be rooted out of the church. Whether out of fear, an attempt at positive public relations or damage control, or a sincere desire to protect and care for children, more churches and denominations are openly discussing the need for safeguarding and a caring response to allegations of abuse. As more churches acknowledge the problem and admit the need to act, they take the first step on the path. To move further down this path, the church must take the following next steps.

Connect child abuse to the Christian faith

Until the church connects the issue of child abuse to the Christian faith, little progress will be made in the prevention of denialism. This is so because, while most agree that the church should be mindful and informed of the latest science and professional thinking on the subject, many within Christianity feel that these must take a secondary role to the fulfillment of the Christian faith. To bring this next step to fruition, the church must implement these three steps.

Recognize that child abuse and denialism is a systemic problem. Some churches and denominations have made bold statements prioritizing safeguarding children and having strong responses to child abuse, though others are encountering more resistance to making this need more central (Forty-Seventh General Assembly, 2019; Well, 2019). Those who balk at this focus fail to see the added harm when spiritual power is wielded to justify the abuse or silence survivors. Even when churches make progress against this resistance, it may be short-lived or eventually watered down (Shellnutt, 2023b). Additionally, division remains regarding several faith leaders who seem to have a history of abuse or silence who now claim to speak for survivors or who remain preaching in the pulpit.

These obstacles are perplexing, as themes of abuse prevention and response run throughout the Bible, demanding a central focus of every church and denomination (Singer, 2023). Until those in the church publicly and privately acknowledge the harm that has been caused by child abuse and denialism and the ways church systems have often perpetuated the problem, denialism will remain entrenched (Ruttenberg, 2022). Only when the church sincerely makes this acknowledgment will any progress be made.

Address child abuse and denialism in theology. After a broader acknowledgment that child abuse and denialism are sources of harm within the church, there must be a concerted effort to engage theologically on this subject. Scripture is often misused to justify abuse of children and denialism (Guidepost, 2022). As one example, the report issued by Guidepost Solutions about their investigation of the Executive Council of the Southern Baptist Church contains an "internal memo" from the SBC general counsel in which he contends the focus on addressing the sin of sexual abuse was a "satanic scheme to completely distract us from evangelism" (Guidepost Solutions, 2022). These and similar sentiments have been expressed throughout the decades by many in the Christian church. As a result, there is a critical need for Christians everywhere to do some soul searching on how distorted theology has contributed to crimes against children. This begins with every Christian studying the life and words of Christ as they pertain to children and to the sin of child abuse and then using the actions and words of Christ to guide the response to abuse (Veith, 2018). It continues to examining theology of power, including the voice of children and those who should rise in their defense (Langberg, 2020). It includes examining science and best practice related to child abuse and denialism and developing a theological construct related to these central issues that moves the need to respond well to child abuse beyond a civil law to a central tenet of the Christian faith (Singer, 2023). Only when these and related theological reforms take place in every corner of Christianity will denialism be overcome.

Address child abuse and denialism in ongoing teaching and preaching. Theology is essential, for it underpins the beliefs of the church. Theology will have significantly reduced impact, however, if it is not taught to congregants. Many efforts have sought to raise awareness of child abuse within the broader culture, faith communities generally, and Christianity specifically. Still, there remains an alarming lack of teaching and preaching about children, child abuse, and denialism (Smietana, 2014). This conveys several alarming messages to those currently experiencing abuse and those who may have experienced it in the past. These messages include its lack of centrality to the heart of God when it is not mentioned, false beliefs about accountability when teaching includes examples of people supposedly wrongly judged when they were accused of offending, justification of denialism when teachings about gossip do not include an explanation of how reporting abuse is not gossip, pressure to prematurely forgive or accept questionable repentance when forgiveness and repentance are not adequately explained, and misplaced blame when teachings about topics such as David's sexual assault of Bathsheba place blame on both David and Bathsheba. While many of the strategies to address these harmful effects may take extensive efforts to retrain and prepare teachers to properly address these topics, simply including teachings about children, abuse, and

denialism overcomes the false notion that scripture is silent when it comes to abuse, and plentiful resources are available for this basic first step.

Raise the education level for all within the church

The most fundamental next step in overcoming denialism within the church is addressing theology. Efforts must also be made to raise the education level of all people within the church related to child abuse and denialism. In order to accomplish this, subject matter experts need to specifically target those in positions of leadership through seminary and continuing education, as well as congregants through quality training that is readily accessible to all.

Seminary and continuing education. As the church recognizes the centrality of child abuse and neglect to the Christian faith, leaders must be shown that this is indeed a priority. Many pastors receive specialized training in a seminary before leading a church. Other leaders, even if not a seminary graduate, still often complete continuing education. Both of these avenues must be targeted to raise the education level of church leaders relative to child abuse and denialism. Even though this is a need that has been raised for years, it has not yet come to fruition, and seminaries are only slowly adding content that addresses the need and strategies for safeguarding (Maxwell, 2017; Vieth, 2019, 2023a; Well, 2019). Few seminaries directly address child abuse, and those that do often provide only cursory and often inaccurate mentions of this central topic (Vieth, 2024). Several efforts have arisen to increase awareness among church leaders who have already completed seminary or who are not required to complete seminary for their leadership position, but the quality of these varies significantly, with many focusing on liability and image management, rather than protection. Even when quality teaching is available, churches often view it as an optional training and not worthy of the cost. As churches realize the centrality of child abuse and denialism, this effect may diminish.

Congregation-wide training. While a great deal of responsibility rests with leadership, much also lies with all the adults in a congregation. More than just the leaders are tasked with protecting children; all adults in the entire congregation share this sacred task. This is a weighty undertaking, and many adults question their ability to carry out this part of the Christian mission without receiving additional training. To meet this need, quality congregation-wide training must become widespread. This training must contain several key components, including a clear explanation of what abuse is, how each person has a role to play, what that role is, and a clear plan for fulfilling that role.

There are a variety of ways such training may be made available to congregants. Perhaps the most straightforward is for a church to bring in someone to train the full congregation, whether in-person or remotely. Alternatives

exist, however, such as local conferences that address abuse and which a representation from the church could attend and then bring back the information to the church. While it bears less message of importance and risks excluding congregants from this training, churches should remember that such options exist if they are not able to access a formal training for the entire congregation. Consulting with subject matter experts may yield additional options as well.

Establish expectations of conduct for all. Belief and teaching will not accomplish much if they are not tied to behavior. Churches can accomplish this by building on the beliefs and education they have fostered and requiring behavior that reflects it of leaders and congregants alike. The guidelines may be hard to see, but, fortunately, there are resources that can help.

Every church meets or exceeds the CDC's standards for youth-serving organizations. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) has developed a hearty list of standards for organizations that serve children and youth. In one form or another, this includes most churches. While these standards were developed by the CDC, they reflect Scriptural values and the call Christ has placed on His church to care for children and youth.

The CDC divides its standards into six central areas: screening and selecting employees and volunteers; guidelines on interactions between individuals; monitoring behavior; ensuring safe environments; responding to inappropriate behavior, breaches in policy, and allegations and suspicions of sexual abuse; and training about child sexual abuse prevention (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2007). Most of these standards are best implemented through a child and youth safeguarding policy.

Trauma-informed practices. The term "trauma-informed" is controversial in some church environments. When breaking down the term, we recognize that it does not have to be. "trauma-informed" simply means to understand trauma and how that understanding impacts our interactions with each other. scripture has multiple references to trauma throughout its narrative, and the church is called to follow that lead (Singer, 2023).

The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) has developed a list of six key principles for organizations to follow when seeking to be more trauma-informed. These six principles rest firmly in scripture and form a path which a church may follow (Singer, 2023). These six principles are safety; trustworthiness and transparency; peer support; collaboration and mutuality; empowerment, voice, and choice; and historical, cultural, and gender factors associated with trauma. As churches more closely adhere to these principles, they will more closely mirror Christ's call to care for and protect children and youth, a call that resists denialism.

Policy

When implementing a child and youth safeguarding policy, it is important to remember that the policy does not exist for itself. Instead, the policy represents the culture and values of the church. If this does not describe a church's policy, then both the culture and the policy need to be examined. The policy should be direct and clear. Ambiguity chips away at a sense of trustworthiness, and it should be avoided.

A central feature of a child and youth safeguarding policy is clarification of behavioral expectations of all participants, including staff, volunteers, other parents, students, and any others who may be involved. This set of behavioral expectations naturally flows from an understanding of standards put out by organizations such as the CDC and SAMHSA, coupled with an awareness of the priority scripture places on trauma and trauma-informed practices.

Accountability

A church may say they follow a clear policy of expected behavior. They may say it rests in the culture of protection they have engendered. Without a clear way to establish accountability, however, any practices and policies will quickly fade in their importance and impact.

Policy. Just as policy is essential in laying out behavioral expectations that protect children and fight denialism, so policy is necessary in laying out accountability when those policies are not followed. This gives a clear path for responding to behavioral violations, and it also protects those who are making allegations and against whom the allegations are made.

The accountability policy must clearly apply to all people in the church, regardless of position or power. It needs to lay out a clear path for reporting violations of the policy, including a directive to report and a listing of those to whom reports can be made. All people in the church must be subject to this accountability, whether it results in removal from ministry or other disciplinary sanctions. This can be a significant challenge, so the church may benefit from support in developing its policy.

When combining the policy on behavior and the policy on accountability, churches should be aware that this living document must remain accessible. To be accessible, the policy must be in a location where it can be accessed by any congregant who wants to reference it. It should be written in understandable language and be of a reasonable length. The length will vary considerably based on the setting, and each church must wrestle with the best practices in their setting.

Investigations. Unfortunately, there will come times when there is a serious breach of behavioral policy. When this occurs, the policy should direct the church toward an independent investigation. The first option

for an independent investigation is the authorities. The violation may be illegal or trigger mandated reporting. Under no circumstances should church staff abdicate their role as mandated reporters. If child protection, law enforcement, or other applicable authorities say they will not investigate; if the church wishes to engage a fuller exploration of the culture that led to the policy violation; or the church wishes to assess their response to the violation, an independent investigation should be considered by the church.

Investigations can be very challenging. There is a temptation for the church to investigate themselves, but this is not a good option. Often, an alleged offender has been grooming the entire church body, not just their intended victims. As such, if the church conducts an internal investigation, many of those who would investigate have been included in the community grooming, leaving them biased as they investigate. Beyond that, most people in the church have not had the necessary training to conduct an investigation. Trauma-informed interviewing techniques, deep awareness of abuse dynamics, and other elements are all required to complete a thorough investigation, and this is typically only accomplished through an independent third-party investigation.

Conclusion

Some argue that the driver for denialism is the desire for something not to be true (Khan-Harris, 2018). Despite the desire for sexual abuse to not be present in faith institutions, it does exist. Rather than engaging in a narrative of doubt, institutions should humbly ask: Where did we fail? Why did we fail? How did we fail? This posture of self-reflection, coupled with transparency, is institutional courage.

Dr. Diane Langberg (2020) states: "Deception starts with the self, not others. [In many Christian belief systems,] This was true of Satan. He deceived himself into thinking he could and should be like the Most High . . . We find ways to tell ourselves things that are not true so we can believe them and act on them without internal conflict (p. 33)." Oftentimes when a disruptive situation occurs, such as becoming aware of CSA in the church, acting to deny the situation or bury one's head in the sand is a way of self protection and self-deception to avoid internal conflict. However, that internal conflict about the disrupting situation is the thing that can be used as an agent of growth if the individual and faith institution allow it. Judith Herman states:

> The ordinary response to atrocities is to banish them from consciousness. Certain violations of the social compact are too terrible to utter aloud: this is the meaning of the word unspeakable. Atrocities, however, refuse to be buried. Equally as powerful as the desire to deny atrocities is the conviction that denial does not work . . . . Remembering and telling the truth about terrible events are prerequisites for the restoration of the social order and for the healing of individual victims (Cooper-White, 2017, p. 17).

There is a significant body of research that spirituality can be a source of resiliency and may aid an abused child in coping physically and emotionally (Bryant-Davis et al., 2012,; Walker et al., 2009). Even without meaningful intervention, child abuse victims maintaining a connection to their faith communities have fewer mental health conditions throughout their life (Reinert et al., 2016). The research around religious and spiritual coping shows that "[s]pirituality provides a belief system and sense of divine connectedness that helps give meaning to the traumatic experience and has been shown over and over to aid in the recovery process" of trauma (Gwinn & Hellman, 2019, p. 180). Given these dynamics, the Christian church could be a powerful force in addressing the spiritual impact of child abuse, but this can only happen in institutions where denialism is overcome (Gwinn & Hellman, 2019).

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