Lessons From the SBC Sexual Abuse Crisis

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The Roman Catholic Church is not the only religious body that has been plagued by acts of sexual abuse perpetrated by its clergy. In 2019, the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) was rocked by allegations that over 700 church members were sexually violated by nearly 400 clergy persons or others in positions of authority in the church. Echoing what was done by members of the Catholic hierarchy, responsible parties within the SBC ignored or downplayed earlier victim reports, leading to a cascade of cases that finally burst into the public eye via a series of newspaper stories. Written by an author with expertise on sexual abuse within faith communities, this article reveals the findings and recommendations published in the SBC's Caring Well report, which was prepared by persons affiliated with the SBC. It also describes the more incisive contents of the Guidepost Report, which were based on the findings of an independent investigative body.

"None of us smoked. None of us drank. We were church kids. So what we did to feel cool was pile in the car with the minister and laugh at his jokes. In hindsight, cigarettes and alcohol would have been a lot safer."[1]

~ Christa Brown

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[1] Brown, Christa (2009). *This little light: Beyond a Baptist preacher predator and his gang*. Available from *Amazon.com*. Also accessible through Foremost Press at *https://www.publishersglobal.com*.

INTRODUCTION

The Southern Baptist Convention (SBC)is the largest religious denomination in the United States with over 47,000 churches and more than 13.6 million members.[2] The denomination was formed in 1845[3] and is more heavily concentrated in the South. However, the growth of the SBC set "the tone for American Christianity overall and Christianity's influence in public life."[4]

The Southern Baptist Convention "is not a hierarchical religious denomination. It is a Convention of churches that chooses to cooperate with one another . . . Autonomous churches have complete control over their own affairs. . . Cooperation means that a church chooses to be in a friendly relationship and to be sympathetic with the purposes and work of the convention."[5] This means that while "it is possible for a church to fall out of cooperating status with the convention" this "does not mean that the Convention has any authority over the affairs of the local congregation."[6] As noted below, church autonomy played a role in the failure of the SBC to protect children and adults from sexual abuse.

JOURNALISTS' INVESTIGATION OF SEXUAL ABUSE WITHIN SBC

In 2019, reporters from the *Houston Chronicle* and *San Antonio Express-News* published a series of articles on sexual abuse within the SBC. The journalists found approximately 380 clergy and other SBC leaders and volunteers who were alleged to have engaged in sexual misconduct impacting more than 700 victims.[7] According to these journalists:

> Many of the victims were adolescents who were molested, sent explicit photos or texts, exposed to pornography, photographed nude, or repeatedly raped by youth pastors. Some victims as young as 3 were molested or raped inside pastors' studies and Sunday school classrooms. A few were adults — women and men who sought pastoral guidance and instead say they were seduced or sexually assaulted.[8]

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[2] Demographics taken from SBC website in 2022: *https://www.sbc.net/about/what-we-do/fastfacts/#:~:text=The%20Southern%20Baptist%20Convention%20%28SBC%29%20is%20a%20fellowship,and%20socioeconomic%20people%20groups%2C%20are%20called%20%E2%80%9Ccooperating%20churches.%E2%80%9D*.

[3] Jones, R.P. (2020). *White too long: The legacy of white supremacy in American Christianity*. New York, NY: Simon & Schuster.

[4] **Id.** at 2.

[5] Sexual Abuse Advisory Group (2019). *Caring well: A report from the SBC Sexual Abuse Advisory Group* [hereinafter Caring Well], p. 21. Available at *https://caringwell.wpengine.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/Safe-Churches_081220.pdf*, citing Whitfield, A. & Harper, K. (2018), *SBC FAQs: A ready reference* (p. 24). Nashville, TN: B&H Publishing Group.

[6] **Id.**

[7] Downen, R., Olsen, L. & Tedesco, J. (February 11, 2019). 20 years, 700 victims: Southern Baptist sexual abuse spreads as leaders resist reforms. *Houston Chronicle*. Available at *https://www.houstonchronicle.com/news/investigations/article/Southern-Baptist-sexual-abuse-spreads-as-leaders-13588038.php*.

[8] **Id.**

Although the *Houston Chronicle* articles detailed the widespread scope of the problem, issues of sexual abuse within the SBC were detailed years earlier in public materials. For instance, advocate Christa Brown wrote about child sexual abuse at the hands of an SBC minister a decade before the *Houston Chronicle* reporting. Brown wrote: "[The] blind-eye do-nothingness of the many was ultimately far more damaging that the dastardly deeds of the one."[9]

Brown also pointed out the structure of the SBC was often used as an excuse for inaction: "Even when things go terribly wrong, denominational leaders typically wash their hands of the problem and invoke Baptists' congregationalist structure. 'It's up to the local church,' they say."[10]

CARING WELL REPORT

At the SBC annual meeting in 2018, newly elected SBC president J.D. Greear formed a "Sexual Abuse Advisory Group" to "study both how Southern Baptists are currently engaging these issues and develop recommendations in consultation with relevant SBC entities on strategies and resources for ministering to victims and protecting people and churches from predators."[11] After a year of study and conducting "listening sessions" with survivors of abuse, the "Caring Well" report was released in June of 2019.[12]

THE ROLE OF THEOLOGY IN CONTRIBUTING TO OR PREVENTING ABUSE

Many survivors informed the advisory group that "abusers used theology as a way to manipulate and silence them."[13] For instance, one minister used the Biblical account of David and Jonathon to "explain that his sexual abuse was ordained."[14] Another pastor told his victim that "God had spoken to him and wanted the two of them to have a 'special relationship'" which resulted in a year of sexual abuse.[15]

The advisory group noted that "failures have occurred in many ways" and specifically listed the following seven:

- Failing to adequately train our staff and volunteers — on the national, state and congregational levels — to be aware of and respond appropriately to abuse;
- Using church autonomy improperly to avoid taking appropriate action;

[9] Brown, supra note 1.
[10] **Id.**
[11] Caring Well, supra note 5 at p. 24.
[12] Shellnutt, K. (June 10, 2019). Report: How Southern Baptists failed to care about abuse. *Christianity Today*. Available at *https://www.christianitytoday.com/news/2019/june/sbc-caring-well-abuse-advisory-group-report.html*.
[13] Caring Well, supra note 5 at p. 21.
[14] **Id.**
[15] **Id.**

- Failing to care well for survivors of abuse;
- Failing to take disclosure seriously and to believe the survivor;
- Failing to report abuse to civil authorities;
- Recommending suspected perpetrators to new employment;
- Promoting political, institutional, and congregational leaders whose language and behavior glorifies mistreatment of women and children.[16]

As a result, the advisory group discussed at length the need for theological reform or at least an awareness of the role theology often plays in the abuse of children. Specifically, the report states: "We must all be constantly examining not only how we may have wrong theologies, but just as much examining how predatory people can use 'right' theologies too for awful ends."[17]

The advisory group noted several areas in which poor theology contributed to the abuse of children and adults. First, 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)."[18]

Second, the 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."[19] This also resulted in "[b]laming those who suffered abuse" through insensitive, even cruel inquiries such as "What were you wearing?"[20]

Third, the report noted a "misapplication of confession, repentance, and forgiveness of sin."[21] 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."[22] As a result, there was a failure to "ask hard questions of the perpetrator" and a failure "to require him or her to address and take steps to repair damage as a demonstration of repentance."[23] 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.

Fourth, the report stated the SBC had "failed to understand the distinction between the authority of the church and that of the state."[24] Rather than

[16] **Id.** at 17.
[17] **Id.** at 18.
[18] **Id.** at 18.
[19] **Id.** at 18.
[20] **Id.** at 19.
[21] **Id.** at 20.
[22] **Id.** at 20.
[23] **Id.** at 20.
[24] **Id.** at 20.

adhere to the Biblical command to "submit to the authorities (Rom. 13:1-5)," the report found that some in the SBC had tried to "cover up or silence allegations of abuse" out of fear this would "damage the reputation of the church or of Christ."[25]

Fifth, the report notes 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.[26] 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.[27]

Lastly, and particularly pertinent to the SBC, the report noted the SBC doctrine of church autonomy "has been misunderstood in the context of sexual abuse within the church."[28] 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."[29]

RECOMMENDED REFORMS

In addition to a theological house-cleaning, the Caring Well report also addressed strategies for spiritual care of survivors, developing a working relationship with Children's Advocacy Centers (CACs), implementing policies for working with accused offenders, and implementing congregational education on abuse including personal safety training for children.[30] Since the publication of the report, the SBC has developed training modules and other resources to assist congregations in implementing these reforms.[31]

GUIDEPOST REPORT

In 2021, "messengers" to the SBC convention approved the appointment of a task force to supervise an independent investigation of the SBC executive committee's response to sexual abuse during the years 2000 to June 14, 2021. The task force hired an organization called Guidepost Solutions (hereinafter "Guidepost") which issued a report dated May 15, 2022.[32]

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[25] **Id.** at 20.
[26] **Id.** at 20.
[27] **Id.** at 20.
[28] **Id.** at 21.
[29] **Id.** at 21.
[30] **Id.** at 22-36.
[31] Caring Well (2022). *Resources.* Available at *https://www.caringwell.com/resources/.*
[32] Guidepost Solutions (May 15, 2022). *Report of the Independent Investigation. The Southern Baptist Convention executive committee's response to sexual abuse allegations and an audit of the procedures and actions of the credentials committee*. Available at https://tinyurl.com/yc8xyzrn.

The Guidepost investigators conducted an extensive review of documents and interviewed "approximately 330" persons.[33] However, Guidepost did not "affirmatively contact survivors" but "engaged with survivors based on their outreach . . ." As a result, only 22 survivors were spoken to as part of this investigation.[34]

The report concluded that, for nearly two decades, "survivors of abuse and other concerned Southern Baptists have been contacting the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) Executive Committee (EC) to report child molesters and other abusers who were in the pulpit or employed as church staff" but that survivors and others who reported "were ignored, disbelieved, or met with the constant refrain that the SBC could take no action" because of "church autonomy — even if it meant that convicted molesters continued in ministry with no notice or warning to their current church or congregation."[35]

The report singled out "a few senior EC leaders" as well as "outside" counsel for controlling the SBC response to these reports. The report concluded these individuals "were singularly focused on avoiding liability for the SBC to the exclusion of other considerations."[36] As a result, "many reform efforts were met with resistance, typically due to concerns over incurring liability."[37]

In furtherance of this aim, the report cited evidence that victims were denigrated including a chilling e-mail suggesting the devil was using sexual abuse allegations to stem the true work of the church. This e-mail states:

> This whole thing should be seen for what it is. It is a satanic scheme to completely distract us from evangelism. It is not the gospel. It is not even a part of the gospel. It is a misdirection play. Yes, Christa Brown [a survivor] and Rachael Denhollander [a survivor advocate] have succumbed to an availability heuristic because of their victimizations. They have gone to the SBC looking for sexual abuse, and of course, they found it. Their outcries have certainly caused an availability cascade . . . but they are not to blame. This is the devil being temporarily successful.[38]

GUIDEPOST RECOMMENDATIONS

The Guidepost report contains approximately 30 pages of recommendations. This includes a task force to "continue the work of addressing sexual abuse."[39] The report suggests an "administrative entity" to provide permanent resources related to the prevention and response of sexual abuse including

[33] **Id.** at 22.
[34] **Id.** at 27.
[35] **Id.** at 3.
[36] **Id.** at 3.
[37] **Id.** at 8.
[38] **Id.** at 6.
[39] **Id.** at 260.

"continuing education and research on the issue of sexual abuse,"[40] and recommends "safe space" training for all SBC schools,[41] and a "self-certification program" which would allow SBC members to know which churches are following best practice — and which are falling short.[42] The report also suggests a "media plan" to create awareness of sexual abuse which may include an annual "survivor Sunday" in which churches could create awareness of abuse.[43] Additionally, the report suggests "a formal and permanent" memorial at the SBC offices in Nashville "as a way to publicly acknowledge mistakes in the past and the SBC's commitment to reform."[44]

SBC RESPONSE TO THE GUIDEPOST REPORT

At the annual SBC convention in June of 2022, the SBC voted to support the creation of a database to track offenders and the creation of a new task force to study the Guidepost report and make recommendations.[45] Although some survivors considered the convention to be a turning point in the sexual abuse scandal, others lamented the SBC did not act more decisively. Christa Brown wrote, "It's better than nothing but that's such a low bar. And if that is all that's done even when such massive media is mustered, that saddens me."[46]

LESSONS FROM THE SBC SEXUAL ABUSE CRISIS

There is no indication in either the Caring Well or Guidepost report that SBC seminaries or other educational entities prepared clergy or other leaders to recognize or respond to abuse. Rather, the emphasis in the Caring Well report on addressing theological shortcomings appears to be a concession that neither the clergy nor the laity were well educated on this subject and thus were ripe to adopt the theological distortions used by many offenders to justify abuse.[47] Indeed, the report specifically notes the failure to "adequately train" staff and volunteers at all levels.[48]

[40] **Id.** at 261-262.
[41] **Id.** at 263.
[42] **Id.** at 264.
[43] **Id.** at 273.
[44] **Id.** at 273.
[45] Updated Task Force Challenges and Formal Recommendations (June 17, 2022). Available at: *https://www.sataskforce.net/updates/task-force-challenges-and-formal-recommendations-sn54p*.
[46] Shellnut, K. (June 17, 2022). After annual meeting Southern Baptists begin the hard work of abuse reform. *Christianity Today.* Available at *https://www.christianitytoday.com/news/2022/june/southern-baptist-sbc-enact-abuse-reform-survivors-meeting.html*.
[47] Vieth, V.I. (2012). What would Walther do? Applying law & gospel to victims and perpetrators of child sexual abuse. *Journal of Psychology and Theology, 40(4)*, 257-273 and Giardino, A.P., Vieth, V., Berkovits, S. & Pitkoff, D. (2021). Child abuse prevention in the faith-based environment. In V.J. Palusci, F.E. Vandervort, D.E. Greydanus & J. Merrick (Eds.), *Preventing child abuse: Critical roles and multiple perspectives* (Chapter 16). Happauge, NY: NOVA Science Publishers Inc.
[48] Caring Well, supra note 5, at p. 18.

Given the toxic theological constructs that played a role in the abuse of children and adults, as well as in dismissing or minimizing these crimes, it is curious that neither report has a clear recommendation for seminary reform. It is also troubling that both reports focus only on sexual abuse and, even then, primarily sexual abuse within the church. This narrow focus may be because sexual abuse within the church has been the primary emphasis of journalists, but it means that children being sexually abused in the home may receive less protection. Moreover, the reports do not address physical abuse, emotional abuse, torture, neglect, witnessing violence or other forms of maltreatment. The weakness in this approach is more fully discussed in the recommendations below.

Although the reports have a number of suggested reforms that, if fully implemented, would leave children and adults better protected, the recommendations are more narrowly focused than what many experts recommend.[49] As a blueprint for the SBC, and for other faith communities seeking to address child abuse in all its forms and complexities, the following recommendations may be helpful.

1. IMPLEMENT SEMINARY COURSEWORK ON CHILD ABUSE

Child abuse not only has a physical and emotional impact,[50] but also a spiritual impact.[51] The spiritual impact is particularly pronounced when the person who abused the child is a pastor, elder or other faith leader. For instance, a recent study published in the *Journal of Child Sexual Abuse* found that the negative impact on a child's faith was four times greater when a child was abused by clergy as opposed to family members.[52] The resulting spiritual damage significantly increases the risk for suicidal ideation or other mental health challenges.[53]

At the same time, research has consistently found that a healthy sense of spirituality is an important source of resilience which often mitigates

[49] Tchividjian, B. & Berkovits, S.M. (2017). *The child safeguarding policy guide for churches and ministries* [Hereinafter Tchividjian & Berkovits] (p. 9). Greensboro, NC: New Growth Press. Available at *newgrowthpress.com*.

[50] Felitti, V.J. & Anda, R.F. (2010). The relationship of adverse childhood experiences to adult medical disease, psychiatric disorders and sexual behavior: Implications for healthcare. In R.A. Lanius, E. Vermeten, & C. Pain, (Eds.), *The impact of early life trauma on health and disease: The hidden epidemic* (pp. 77-87). Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press.

[51] Vieth, V.I. & Singer, P. (2019). Wounded souls: The need for child protection professionals and faith leaders to recognize and respond to the spiritual impact of child abuse. [Hereinafter Wounded Souls] *Mitchell Hamline Law Review, 45(4)*, 1230-1233.

[52] Perada, N., Talbo, L.C., Segura, A. & Celedon, F.M. (2022). An exploratory study on mental health, social problems and spiritual damage in victims of child sexual abuse by Catholic clergy and other perpetrators. *Journal of Child Sexual Abuse, 31(4)*, 393-411.

[53] **Id.**

the physical and emotional harm of child abuse.[54] Two scholars summarize the research this way:

> The research around religious and spiritual coping shows strong and convincing relationships between psychological adjustment and physical health following trauma. Spirituality 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.[55]

Given these dynamics, every seminary should have a required course which instructs faith leaders to recognize and respond to child abuse. Clergy must be instructed as to the impact of child abuse physically, emotionally, and spiritually.[56] Clergy must know how to minister to a survivor in a trauma-informed manner, and to coordinate spiritual care with medical[57] and evidence-based mental health care.[58]

It is encouraging that one SBC seminary, Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary, in Wake Forest, North Carolina, has implemented a child sexual abuse prevention and response course and that this course is mandatory.[59] It would be wise for all SBC seminaries to implement similar courses. However, we know from research and experience that a child abused in one way is often abused in multiple ways. We also know that children abused in multiple

[54] Davis, T.B., et al. (2012). Religiosity, spirituality, and trauma recovery in the lives of children and adolescents. *Professional Psychology Research and Practice, 43(4)*, 306-314; Gall, T.L. (2006). Spirituality and coping with life stress among adult survivors of childhood sexual abuse. *Child Abuse & Neglect, 30*(7), 829-844; Kim, J. (2008). The protective effects of religiosity on maladjustment among maltreated and nonmaltreated children. *Child Abuse & Neglect, 32(7)*, 711-720; Reinhert, K.G., et al. (2016). The role of religious involvement in the relationship between early trauma and health outcomes among adult survivors. *Journal of Child & Adolescent Trauma, 9(3)*, 231-241; Jouriles, E.N., et al. (2019). Divine spiritual struggles and psychological adjustment among adolescents who have been sexually abused. *Psychology of Violence, 10(3)* 334-343; Gower, T. (2020). Caregiver and divine support: Associations with resilience among adolescents following disclosure of sexual abuse. *Child Abuse & Neglect, 109(Nov)*, 104681.

[55] Gwinn, C. & Hellman, C. (2019). *Hope rising: How the science of HOPE can change your life*. New York, NY: Morgan James Publishing.

[56] Russell, A. (2018). The spiritual impact of child abuse and exploitation: What research tells us. *Currents in Theology and Mission, 45(3)*, 14-19; Walker, D.F., Reid, H.W., O'Neill, T. & Brown, L. (2009). Changes in personal religion/spirituality during and after childhood abuse: A review and synthesis. *Psychological Trauma: Theory, Research, Practice & Policy, 1(2)*, 130-145.

[57] Vieth, V. (2018). Coordinating medical and pastoral care in cases of child abuse and neglect. *Currents in Theology and Mission 45(3)*, 27-30.

[58] Singer, P. (2018). Coordinating pastoral care of survivors with mental health providers, *Currents in Theology and Mission, 45(3)*, 31-35.

[59] Burchett, C. (July 11, 2022). SEBTS launches mandatory sexual abuse prevention and response course. *Baptist Press*. Available at *https://www.baptistpress.com/resource-library/news/sebts-launches-mandatory-sexual-abuse-prevention-and-response-course/.*

ways, known as "poly-victims," often display greater signs of trauma and are often the easiest targets for abuse within the church.[60] Accordingly, it is critical that these courses address all forms of child abuse. A narrow focus on sexual abuse leaves no room at the inn for most abused children.

2. IMPLEMENT CHILD ADVOCACY STUDIES IN FAITH-BASED UNDERGRADUATE PROGRAMS

There is a large and growing body of research that most mandated reporters and other professionals who respond to child abuse are poorly trained at the undergraduate level and, as a result, often make critical errors.[61] There is, however, a national movement called Child Advocacy Studies or CAST which has proven to significantly improve the skills of future mandated reporters and child protection professionals in recognizing and responding to instances of child abuse and neglect.[62] CAST has now been implemented in 92 undergraduate and graduate programs across the country. Since many colleges and universities are faith-based, the faith community can play a critical role in improving the child protection system by implementing CAST. Moreover, these better-educated child protection professionals can be a powerful source of trauma-informed responses at their faith communities.

3. CHILD PROTECTION POLICIES MUST ADDRESS ALL FORMS OF ABUSE AND MUST ADDRESS ABUSE IN THE HOME AS WELL AS IN THE FAITH COMMUNITY

Although many faith communities do not have any child protection policies,[63] those that do often focus narrowly on addressing sexual abuse within the

[60] Tchividjian & Berkovits, supra note 49.

[61] Vieth, V.I., et al. (2019). Child Advocacy Studies (CAST): A national movement to improve the undergraduate and graduate training of child protection professionals. *Mitchell Hamline Law Review, 45(4)*, 1129-1159.

[62] In a multi-year study of CAST in Mississippi, which has 28 undergraduate and graduate programs, researchers concluded CAST students scored higher than non-CAST students on a range of outcomes measuring knowledge and judgment in responding to child maltreatment" and students "pursuing CAST certificates and minors had substantially better knowledge and judgments than other CAST students." Cross, T.P. & Chiu, Y. (August 18, 2022). Final report: Program evaluation of Mississippi's CAST initiative. Available at *https://childadvocacyms.org/*cast; Osgood, A. (2017). Lessons learned from student surveys in a Child Advocacy Studies (CAST) program. *Journal of Child & Adolescent Trauma, 10(3)*, 261-266; Parker, J., McMillan, L., Olson, S., Ruppel, S. & Vieth, V. (2020). Responding to basic and complex cases of child abuse: A comparison study of recent and current Child Advocacy Studies (CAST) students with DSS workers in the field. *Journal of Child & Adolescent Trauma, 13(4)*, 257-364; Knox, M., Pelletier, H. & Vieth, V. (2013). Educating medical students about adolescent maltreatment. *International Journal of Adolescent Medicine and Health, 25(3)*, 301-308; Knox, M., Pelletier, H. & Vieth, V. (2014). Effects of medical student training in child advocacy and child abuse prevention and intervention. *Psychological Trauma: Theory, Research, Practice, and Policy, 6(2)*, 129-133; Pelletier, H. & Knox, M. (2017). Incorporating child maltreatment training into medical school curricula. *Journal of Child & Adolescent Trauma, 10(3)*, 267-274.

[63] 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

church. This leaves unprotected children abused in their homes who may nonetheless be intersecting regularly with the faith community in myriad ministries. It also leaves unprotected children who are physically abused, emotionally abused, neglected, witnessing family violence, or tortured.

As noted previously, most children who are abused are violated in multiple ways and children abused in the home are often easy targets for sex offenders in the faith community.[64] Accordingly, policies that do not focus on protecting all the children in the faith community from all forms of abuse are more likely to fail in protecting children from *any* form of abuse.

4. ALL YOUTH MINISTERS AND VOLUNTEERS MUST MEET THE SAMHSA STANDARDS FOR TRAUMA-INFORMED CARE

The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) has promulgated standards for trauma-informed care. Every faith community should adhere to these standards with a particular emphasis on youth ministers, volunteers and others who may be serving children. Some faith communities have been proactive in meeting these standards in their youth ministries[65] but most continue to fall short.

5. DEVELOP FAITH AND CHILD PROTECTION COLLABORATIONS

Responding with excellence to child abuse necessitates that faith leaders develop working relationships with child abuse experts. Nearly every community in the United States is served by an accredited Children's Advocacy Center (CAC) which provides evidence-based medical and mental health services and coordinates multi-disciplinary team (MDT) responses to child

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, A., Evans, M., Frank, I. & Sharpling, D. (September 2021), *Child protection in religious organizations and settings, Investigation Report*, p. 38*;* A recently published analysis of the written child protection policies of the 32 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, S.J., Hamilton, M.A., Glocker, S. & Ortiz, Andrew J. (September 1, 2021, online publication date). Analysis of the written policies of the 32 U.S. Archdioceses on the prevention of child sexual abuse. *Journal of Child Sexual Abuse*, *30(8)*, 891. Available at *https://doi.org/1080/10538712.2021.1970678.*

[64] Tchividjian and Berkovits, supra note 49.

[65] Crosby, III, R. G., Smith, E.I., Gage, J. & Blanchette, L. (2021). Trauma-informed children's ministry: A qualitative descriptive study. *J. of Child & Adolescent Trauma, 14(4)*, 493. doi: 10.1007/540653-020-00334-w.

maltreatment. CACs are often proactive in child abuse prevention initiatives and can add a wealth of resources for faith communities. It is very encouraging that the Caring Well report specifically endorses developing stronger ties to CACs.

Although there are many opportunities for effective faith and child protection collaborations, here are two examples. First, the Office of Victims of Crime of the United States Department of Justice has recognized as a promising practice a program called HALOS.[66] Although the program has unfolded in different states under different names,[67] the concept is the same: develop working relationships with local child protection agencies so that the faith community can help maltreated children who have a need the government cannot or will not provide.[68]

In one case, for example, a child was sexually assaulted in her bedroom and, as a result, wanted a different bed, and a new apartment that did not trigger memories of the rape. In that case, faith leaders provided a new bed and helped the family get out of its current apartment lease and find new housing. As illustrated by this example, HALOS is a simple concept that meets the needs of maltreated children, educates faith communities about those who are hurting, and witnesses our faith through service to children.

Second, several national child abuse experts have argued for the need to develop specially trained chaplains who can work with local medical and mental health professionals in addressing the spiritual needs of maltreated children.[69] In a 2017 study, researchers documented how often abused children raise spiritual or religious questions during forensic or investigative interviews.[70] Questions may include:

- "Am I still a virgin in God's eyes?"
- "I prayed and prayed for the abuse to stop but it never did. What does that say about God or me or both?"
- "I have a lot of hatred. I want to get even with the people who have hurt me. Is it sinful to inflict pain on the people who have been so cruel to me? What does God have to say about anger?"[71]

The researchers noted the potential value of faith leaders collaborating with child protection professionals in addressing questions such as these.

[66] HALOS stands for Helping and Lending Outreach Support. See *https://ovc.ojp.gov/sites/g/files/xyckuh226/files/halos/index.html*. See also *https://ovc.ojp.gov/sites/g/files/xyckuh226/files/halos/what_is_halos.html*.

[67] In Minnesota, for example, the program is called Care in Action: *https://www.careinactionmn.org/* (last visited August 22, 2022).

[68] Wounded Souls, supra note 51.

[69] Vieth, V.I., Everson, M.D., Vaughan-Eden, V., Tiapula, S., Galloway-Williams, S. & Nettles, C. (2020). Keeping faith: The potential role of a chaplain to address the spiritual needs of maltreated children and advise child abuse multi-disciplinary teams. *Liberty L. Rev., 14(2)*, 351.

[70] Tishelman, A.C. & Fontes, L.A. (2017). Religion in child sexual abuse forensic interviews. *Child Abuse & Neglect, 63()*, 120.

[71] Wounded Souls, supra note 51.

It would, though, require meaningful, evidence-based education for both faith and child protection leaders to develop these collaborations.

CONCLUSION

When discussing abuse within institutions, many experts comment on the perceived need of staff and volunteers to protect the institution above all else. While this certainly is a contributing factor to the failure to address abuse, we often pay little attention to the role insufficient seminary training and continuing education plays in permitting abuse to thrive at significant levels. This is remarkable given that theological distortions often play a central role in offenders justifying their crimes and church leaders in justifying inaction.

The need for theological engagement with the topic of child abuse is increasingly finding its way into the academic literature on child abuse scandals within faith communities. In one recent analysis of the child sexual abuse scandal within the Catholic church, two scholars write:

> [W]e must resist the understandable temptation to suggest that the primary way of responding to Catholic sexual abuse ought to be the implementation of safeguards for children, at least as that has been understood in the U.S. The only way to adequately address the causes and legacies of clergy sexual abuse is through deep and sustained structural and theological reform.[72]

There is an emerging "child theology" movement[73] which focuses on the moral obligation to care for children in need — a theme found in the sacred texts of nearly all faith traditions.[74] If faith traditions did, indeed, focus on their moral obligations to children, most reforms would fall into place naturally. Moreover, there would no longer be a narrow focus on preventing only the type of sexual abuse which may result in bad publicity or a lawsuit. Instead, faith communities would act to protect all the children entrusted to them from whatever form of abuse endangers them.

[72] Wheatley, M. & McCabe, M. (2023). Our transgressions before you are many, and our sins testify against us (Is 59:12a): Re-Imagining Church in Light of Colonization and Catholic Sexual Abuse. Taking Responsibility: Jesuit Educational Institutions Confront the Causes and Legacy of Clergy Sexual Abuse: Final Project Report.

[73] Bunge, M.J. (Ed.) (2008). *The child in the Bible.* Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.; Bunge, M.J. (2001). *The child in Christian thought.* Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.; Vieth, V.I. (2018). *On this rock: A call to center the Christian response to child abuse on the life and words of Jesus*. Eugene, Oregon: Wipf & Stock Publishers; Bunge, M.J. (Ed.) (2021). *Child theology: Diverse methods and global perspectives*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books.

[74] Browning, D.S. & Bunge, M.J. (Eds.) (2009). *Children & childhood in world religions: Primary sources & texts.* Piscataway, NJ: Rutgers University Press.