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### Sexual Abuse in the Protestant Church

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Sexual Abuse in the Protestant Church

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## **Abstract**

Sexual abuse is a tragic reality of living in a fallen world. Though abuse of any kind is inexcusable, Christians know that it is the product of the evil, sinful hearts of mankind. Unfortunately, churches have not escaped the grasp of this evil; sexual abuse is as much a reality for God's people as it is for the rest of the world. No one is untouchable, and everyone must be aware of the truth; however, I will caution readers that this paper discusses dark, horrible practices that can bother anyone, especially survivors and others with firsthand experiences of abuse. I begin with an attempt to capture the prevalence of abuse within Protestant churches as well as discussing general profiles of survivors and perpetrators. Thousands of men, women, and children experience sexual abuse by ministers, leaders and congregation members as well as within their own church-going families. The cases of sexual abuse carry a general profile that can be helpful in understanding how the abuse occurs. I then provide a summary of resources and literature available to churches, families, and individuals. Finally, I provide a number of key responses from several individuals who have dealt with church sexual abuse through interviews with numerous pastors, counselors, and other experts.

*Keywords:* sexual abuse, survivor, perpetrator, church, resources

## **Part 1: Prevalence and Profiles**

Sexual abuse is a prevalent topic in today's society and for good reason. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2020) states that one out of every three women and one out of every four men in the United States will experience some form of sexual violence in their lifetime. This number is staggering, and unfortunately, many of these situations take place within the Lord's church, the body of Christ. Significant attention has been cast toward the Catholic faith and the numerous scandals and abuses that have been taking place, particularly those at the hands of spiritual leaders, but this is an issue that has certainly affected the Protestant faith as well.

Because of this, the Southern Baptist Convention has recently been intentional about investigating the scope of the problem and about equipping churches with the tools and information necessary to address the issue and to care for those who have already been abused. With so many people being affected by the horror of trauma and abuse, particularly sexual in nature, the people of God must be willing and ready to not only come to grips with the extent of the problem but to also take steps to answer this issue with love both through action by ending the abuse and through loving support for the victims.

The prevalence of sexual abuse in the Protestant Christian church, just as in society as a whole, is mind-blowing – though much more research is needed to truly understand the magnitude of the problem. The Southern Baptist Convention's Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission put together a Sexual Abuse Advisory Group that researched and wrote a brief report to reveal the scope of the problem and to suggest some basic responses for churches. An article from the *New York Times* cited within the report claims that there are over two hundred and sixty reports made annually of children, eighteen years old and younger, being sexually

abused by ministers and other workers in the church (SBC Sexual Abuse Advisory Group, 2019, p. 11).

One insurance company, Church Mutual, claimed that it has received an average of one hundred sexual abuse cases involving minors annually over the past ten years, and another, GuideOne, claims that it has received an average of one hundred and sixty cases of the same nature for the past twenty years (The Associated Press, 2007). A third company, Brotherhood Mutual, were not added to the total because the claims were not categorized based on the ages of the victims; however, the company reported having an average of seventy-three cases of sexual abuse involving children and sexual abuse of other nature (The Associated Press, 2007). In all, these three companies reported a total of 7,095 claims of sexual abuse at the hands of pastors, other church staff, members, and other volunteers associated with the church between 1987 and 2007, a twenty-year span (Denney, Kerley, & Gross, 2018).

### **Perpetrator Profile**

The perpetrators are not random people who break into a church, commit the act, and then get out. These are long-time members of churches who, in many cases, are recognized as spiritual leaders. Dubbed “stayers,” these abusers are typically very involved in church activities, and research shows that the longer these people are committed to their church, the more victims they will abuse and the younger those victims will be (SBC Sexual Abuse Advisory Group, 2019, p. 11).

Some key characteristics of the perpetrators of sexual abuse within the Protestant church may shed further light onto the situation. The Multidisciplinary Digital Publishing Institute published a peer-reviewed, descriptive analysis by Denney, Kerley, and Gross (2018) of numerous studies looking into sexual abuse that occurs in the Protestant church. It is important to

note that this study looked solely at staff members and church members in positions of leadership. The study revealed that perpetrators tend to be male; females were offenders in only just over one percent of cases used for the study. The perpetrators are typically narcissistic which may help explain why they are willing to abuse their positions over victims. In seventy-three percent of the cases – the largest majority by far – the offender was white with nineteen percent being black perpetrators.

The range of ages of the perpetrators is vast, including abusers from eighteen years of age up to eighty-eight years of age, but the mean age at the time of the abuse was forty and four-tenths years. Quite interestingly, the age difference between male and female perpetrators at the time of the abuse is rather great. The mean age of men remained relatively near the mean of all perpetrators at forty and a half years; women perpetrator's mean age dropped to just twenty-three and a half years.

Perpetrators occupy various roles within the church, but the greatest percentage of male offenders were pastors – almost thirty-five percent – with youth ministers following closely, just over thirty-one percent. All other roles occupied by male offenders were under ten percent of the total population studied. Female offender roles were also included but had too small of a sample size (n=4) to be appropriately representative, though, this may serve to illuminate how few women act as perpetrators.

### **Situational Profile**

The abuse typically takes place in a private setting, at least for ninety-two percent of sexual abuse cases included in the study. Many times, the abuse will happen during a closed, one-on-one interaction, such as a counseling session; however, forty-five percent of abusive interactions took place off the church's campus: the perpetrator's residence, an off-campus

church activity location, the victim's residence, etc. Thirty-five percent of cases happened on church property in an office, a parking lot, sanctuary, etc., and nineteen percent of cases involved sexual abuse that took place both off and on church grounds (Denney, Kerley, & Gross, 2018).

Sexual misconduct, a branch of sexual abuse that involves less physical abuse than inappropriate interaction, seems to be another issue in many churches. This misconduct may include interactions such as undesired sexual joking; undesired direct messages or texts of inappropriate pictures or sexual advances; inappropriate, long glances especially those directed at the victim's chest; and undesired compliments implying the person was viewing the victim sexually. Sexual misconduct is reported by Earls to have been experienced by forty-four percent of all churchgoers involved in its study to see how believers viewed the issue of sexual abuse and whether or not they believed it is a major problem (2019).

Interestingly, this sexual misconduct is not typically occurring inside the church building. Only twelve percent say the misconduct happened while they were physically at church. Of that twelve percent, ten percent of both those who experienced undesired sexual joking and undesired compliments, seven percent of those who received undesired messages, and eight percent of those who experienced inappropriate, long glances all said the misconduct took place at church. Also, of all the churchgoers surveyed, very few experienced sexual misconduct at the hands of a pastor, another spiritual leader in the church or even another regular attendee, meaning that the amount of sexual misconduct disclosed through this survey is relatively low (Earls, 2019).

### **Inconsistencies of Understandings**

One issue with creating change in the way the Lord's people handle abuse is the inconsistency with individual churches' and individual believers' understanding of the enormity of the problem of sexual abuse in the church. Based on the LifeWay Research's findings from

the same study as above, churchgoers are split fairly evenly in their views of the issue. When given the statement, “I believe many more Protestant pastors have sexually abused children or teens than we have heard about,” thirty-two percent agreed, but thirty-seven percent disagreed, and the other thirty-one percent did not know. When given the same statement again, this time replacing children or teens with adults, the findings were still fairly consistently split with twenty-nine percent agreeing, forty-one percent disagreeing, and thirty percent not knowing either way. Despite these findings, only four percent of those tested said they knew of a church member who did sexually abuse a child or teen, and only four percent of those tested said they know of a church member who did sexually abuse an adult. In both of those scenarios, the abuse was not yet widely known (Earls, 2019). This inconsistency with believers recognizing the vastness of the problem of abuse is an avenue for further violence and abuse and speaks to the high level of underreported instances of abuse.

Thankfully, much research has gone into surveying the scope of the problem recently with LifeWay’s research branch and the Southern Baptist Convention’s Caring Well initiative. Both programs, and many more, aim not only to inform the body of Christ of the darkness that has crept into churches in the form of abuse but also to equip them in creating safe environments, particularly for children and teens, and to guide them in learning how to respond to situations of abuse that do unfortunately occur. These programs are wonderful resources to help Christians, but they must be coupled with Christ’s love for the suffering in order to become truly effective. Individual church families must come to realize the need to address this issue, and individual believers within those church bodies must realize their mandate to actively work to bring justice and discipline to abusers and hope and peace to victims so that they may recognize themselves as



survivors, rather than victims, who can rest in the calming assurance of the Lord's strength and His promises to restore the downtrodden.

Another hindrance to the church's ability to deal with sexual abuse is confusion over social movements such as #MeToo, a social movement that seeks to empower women to disclose their experiences of abuse and find healing within that journey. Forty percent of pastors surveyed by LifeWay Research say that they understand the topics of sexual and domestic violence better because of #MeToo, but thirty-nine percent admit that they have more questions as a result of #MeToo (Smietana, 2018). The other twenty-one percent of pastors say that their understanding of sexual and domestic violence has not changed as a result of the #MeToo movement.

The pastors studied were also asked about their congregations' attitudes toward sexual and domestic abuse as a result of the #MeToo movement. Thirty-two percent of pastors who claim to have heard of the #MeToo movement state that their congregations are more confused about sexual and domestic violence as a result of the movement, and fourteen percent say that their congregations are actually calloused toward the issue as a result of the movement; eighteen percent of the Baptist pastors studied claim that their congregations are callous.

Clearly, there is some bad blood between the mainstream approach to sexual and domestic violence and churches' understandings of the issue. Interestingly, eighty-five percent of all the pastors involved in the study are aware of the #MeToo movement, but only sixteen percent are aware of #ChurchToo, a movement specific to the sexual harassment and abuse that takes place within the church; eighty-four percent had never heard of such a movement (Smietana, 2018). This is not to say that pastors are unaware of the abuse that takes place within the church, but many are unaware of the social movement addressing it specifically.

The general awareness of sexual abuse in the church seems promising, but most pastors and their congregations seem to have little knowledge as to how to handle the information; essentially, they need to know how they can respond to the problem. First, the church needs to be united in learning about the issue. Just by viewing the brief information above, one can easily tell that there is a problem, and though it seems to be widely recognized by churches, it is not widely understood. Christians are still baffled that the church should have to deal with an issue like sexual abuse, and because it is the early stages of the Protestant church's addressing the problem on a large scale, there will naturally be some lag in coming to grips with the problem. However, Christians have to come to the point of acceptance so they may progress to the point of action. This means that they need to understand how sexual abuse of children, teens, or adults is able to occur within the church body. Understanding this will actually be a step toward being able to act on making the necessary changes to make churches safer because they will know what actually needs to be changed and reformed.

## **Part 2: Resources and Literature**

A recent influx of literature and training material helps to inform churches of safety precautions and methods of educating potential victims on avoiding what could become abusive situations. The same is true of materials to train churches in responding to abuse and in caring for the survivors. The Southern Baptist Convention's Caring Well Challenge is an effort to help churches deal with the problem of sexual abuse, and a branch of the Caring Well Challenge's program has been the production of the Caring Well report, a resource not only for Southern Baptists but for all Protestant traditions that are facing the issue of sexual abuse. It is divided into three sections: Share, Care, and Prepare.

### ***Caring Well***

The first section, Share, aims to provide churches the basic information needed to understand sexual abuse that occurs within the church. This includes much of the information cited above, mainly the prevalence of sexual abuse within the Protestant Christian church; however, it also includes information on the effects of abuse for a survivor, a recognition that the church has failed to properly address the issue in the past, and a call for churches within the Southern Baptist Convention to take part in the convention's fight against sexual abuse. The convention seems to be taking this effort against sexual abuse seriously in an effort to be more like Jesus by shining light where there is darkness and by protecting the least of these.

The second section, Care, provides churches with skills to care for abuse survivors, whether or not the abuse took place within the church. Beginning with a confession of the convention's tendency to protect itself as an institution over individual survivors as souls in need of love and restoration that can come only from Christ, this section attempts to correct misunderstandings and wrong thinking about the public's reception of the church in the event that abuse occurs. The advisory group who wrote the report provides aids such as insights into a survivor's experience in disclosing the abuse to the church through the pastoral staff or others within that church family, proper resources for the survivors in the event of sexual abuse occurring, or even tips such as maintaining confidentiality for the survivor until he or she is ready to act – as long as the survivor is a legal adult. This is often information that a typical pastor or church member may not know or understand but that is vital in beneficially caring for a survivor of sexual abuse.

The final section, Prepare, was written in an effort to prevent any future abuse from occurring within the church by sharing some ways to make churches safer. This includes education and training for pastors and other volunteers, education for youth on signs of

grooming, and training for youth in personal protection. Some safety policy and screening guidelines are suggested, and the advisory group also recommends having a security or safety team who actively protect the church during services and events on church grounds. Finally, this section contains future goals, for Southern Baptists in particular, to remain and become even more involved in fighting sexual abuse (SBC Sexual Abuse Advisory Group, 2019).

Recently, the Protestant church's fight against abuse meant teaming up with civil authorities in Texas. The head pastor of First Baptist Church in Farmersville, Texas, Bart Barber, along with the Southern Baptist of Texas Commission and the Southern Baptist Convention's Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission drafted a bill that would allow churches and other non-profit organizations to report claims of sexual abuse to any individual's present or future employer without worry of civil repercussions from the individual. Bill HB 4345 ended up being passed unanimously in the Texas Senate. The future is bright for the church in taking up the Lord's work by fighting sexual abuse. Though it is largely new territory for the people of God, the idea of working with individuals and organizations outside of the church, such as civil authorities, law enforcement, and mental health professionals, is promising both for survivors and for Christians who desire to support and care for them (SBC Sexual Abuse Advisory Group, 2019).

The report concludes with a call to action; churches are asked to participate in the Caring Well Challenge in an effort to tackle the problem of sexual abuse in Southern Baptist churches, though the information and training included in the challenge is applicable to churches outside of the Southern Baptist tradition. The Caring Well Challenge is an eight-step program that can be utilized by individuals, families, groups, and, more ideally, whole congregations; the convention hopes that churches will unite as an entire denomination to take up the challenge.

The basic eight steps walk those who take the challenge through a process that will leave them better equipped to handle sexual abuse from all angles, including training, education, prevention, etc. The first step is to commit not only to the challenge but to the calling of Christians to be caretakers of the abused. The second step is to build a team that will lead the church through the program. Next is to launch the program, leading to the fourth step: training for the designated leadership team at the Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission's Caring Well Conference. The 2019 conference already occurred, but the materials and resources shared at the conference may be found on the Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission's website. The fifth step is to care by utilizing *Becoming a Church that Cares Well for the Abused*, a training guide for pastors and staff to equip them for counseling survivors by hearing their disclosures and providing them with the next steps to take in their situations. Sixth is the prepare step in which churches will either create or better their own safety policies in dealing with sexual abuse. Next is the step to share by dedicating church services to addressing abuse before the entire congregation. The eighth and final step is to reflect on what the church has taken away from the Caring Well program: what has been improved, what could be improved further, what changes have taken place in the church's overall attitude toward sexual abuse, how has the Lord been working in the church through the program, etc. (SBC Sexual Abuse Advisory Group, 2019).

Many other resources, other than the SBC Sexual Abuse Advisory Group's report, are available to churches who wish to improve upon their handling of abuse. *Becoming a Church that Cares Well for the Abused*, mentioned above, is an excellent tool for church leadership to learn not only how to handle cases of sexual abuse but also to equip others in the congregation with at least basic skills that can encourage survivors of abuse.

There are also numerous testimonial books available that can help shed light onto the experiences of adult survivors who have encountered sexual abuse within the church. These books allow readers to step into the shoes of survivors, allowing them to see what aspects of the abuse may have been most traumatizing and to see what responses are most beneficial for the survivor. Realizing that they are not alone in their experiences and struggles is one piece of truth that can serve to help abuse survivors heal from their situations.

### **Resources for Children and Families**

Other books work to train families on protecting children from sexual abuse from a Christian context. *God Made All of Me* is a wonderful resource for parents to use in teaching their children how to avoid and recognize sexual abuse (Holcomb & Holcomb, 2015); other books that seek to teach children about bodily protection include *It's My Body* by Lory Freeman and *I Can Play It Safe* by Alison Fiegh. Some children's books aim to make them more comfortable with the idea of sharing instances of abuse with adults; one is *The Trouble with Secrets* by Karen Johnsen or *Telling Isn't Tattling* by Kathryn Hammerseng. There are also other books and guides available that are geared directly toward parents who wish to educate and train their children.

I think it is important to make a slight departure here to discuss how churches can ethically and appropriately discuss self-protection with children, though I do believe that children's own parents should ultimately take responsibility in discussing sexual matters. For one, the depth of the subject matter would be an issue considering the level of maturity necessary to process such a violent, dark subject. Certainly, high-quality training would be necessary for any teacher to take on such a responsibility that ideally belongs to parents. For this reason, I will focus primarily on a nonfamilial-appropriate approach and the Biblical implications that

accompany this topic. Because the topic of child sexual abuse is not one that has yet been deeply discussed or addressed in the Protestant Christian faith, I do not have much data to shed light on the issue within the church specifically, but I will be drawing from other areas of society, such as the education system, to gain perspective and insight into possible solutions and alternatives.

Certainly most people, if not all, would agree that children must be taught about sexuality and self-protection, but there are competing perspectives as to how this education should be delivered. Some fear that the topic is too difficult to be introduced through traditional methods of education, meaning classroom settings with multiple students learning together. They would argue that the topic is too personal and intense, not only for the children but for their teachers. Untrained and uncomfortable teachers would only serve to make the topic more difficult for children (Hollander 2). In the past, an emphasis has been placed on avoiding “stranger danger” rather than combatting the more realistic scenarios in which children know their abusers well and may even be related to them. Though easy, memorable rules such as “good touch and bad touch” may be useful when instructing a child, they are limiting and do not cover the vast expanse of ways that abuse can occur (Hollander 3).

For this reason, a more holistic approach to teaching children about sexual abuse is vital. Rather than putting all the responsibility on teachers who may or may not be comfortable or equipped to train children, churches should create an atmosphere of safety, including teachers, curriculum, church leadership and staff, and their families. The burden of keeping children safe must be shared. In this way, the method of instruction would expand beyond the walls of the classroom and become a conversation the children would understand and be comfortable acknowledging in every aspect of their lives: at home, at church, at school, etc.

Deuteronomy 6:7 explains that the people of God should teach their children to practice and acknowledge the truths of God all the time: “when you sit in your house and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up” (HCSB). The truths about one’s body and knowing how to protect it from sexual sin fall in line with all other truths that should be practiced and meditated on. Research shows that children are more likely to report abuse when they are comfortable discussing it with a trusted adult (Gulbrandson, 2019). If adults are willing to make themselves uncomfortable, not that discussing sexuality has to be, to discuss sexuality with the children entrusted to them, they have the awesome opportunity to play a major role in the life of a child as a confidant if abuse ever occurred.

Solid research and data show that self-protection can be taught appropriately in churches as well as other social institutions. A study by Bogat and Ratto, though limited in its methodology and number of test subjects, shows that children have the capability to comprehend and apply defensive training (1990). Among preschool-aged children, the experimental group who had the opportunity to participate in a sexual abuse education program showed a significant increase in knowledge on a Personal Safety Questionnaire. Clearly, these children – and I would argue most other children – are quite capable of learning basic self-protection skills and principles.

An effective, truth-based curriculum for teaching children how to prevent their own abuse is one that must be articulated in an age-appropriate manner so that children are not only able to comprehend the implications of Scripture but also cling to their youthful innocence in a dark, fallen world. This curriculum would begin with instruction on honoring the Lord by honoring their bodies. Secular texts address and encourage educating children on the right to bodily privacy (Hollander 3). However, such a curriculum in the context of God’s church would



include not only an explanation of a child's rights to his or her own body but also an explanation of God's view of a child's body.

Text from Paul's first letter to the Corinthians is a prime example. At the very end of chapter six, he writes, "Don't you know that your body is a sanctuary of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have from God? You are not your own, for you were bought at a price. Therefore, glorify God in your body." (1 Cor. 6:19-20, HCSB). When Paul says this, he is clearly discussing sexual immorality, and though his discussion is not intended solely for the education of children within the topic of sexual abuse, there are evident principles that may be applied in that context.

The bodies that the Lord gifts to people are special and important because they are a "sanctuary of the Holy Spirit." Phrasing this truth on a child's level would mean explaining that one way to serve God and show Him love is by honoring the body and life He has given them. This includes teaching the child that not only must he honor his own body, but he also must make sure that other people honor his body; however, anyone who discusses sexual self-protection must stress and make clear that abuse is never the child's fault.

### **Parents' Responsibility**

Churches can educate as much as they want, but depending on their relationships with their children, parents will be the more effective, appropriate educators. It is important that parents are not only aware of dangers that face their children in today's society but also that those parents are able to instruct their children on how to protect themselves. All of the counselors and pastors I interviewed agreed unanimously that teaching children about sexuality as well as how they must recognize ways to protect themselves from inappropriate behavior

should be done by children's own parents; however, they also agreed that churches should have resources and training available in the areas of sexuality and abuse prevention for parents.

Dr. William Viser states, "I think churches could do a much better job of educating parents as to how to have those kinds of talks with their children so that this problem is really, in its genesis, nipped in the bud" (personal communication, March 18, 2020). Dr. Rex Horne provided a similar assessment and added that "parents are sometimes hesitant for others to teach their children these sensitive matters" but that churches can provide training material for parents in their congregations (personal communication, January 27, 2021).

Churches may also utilize practices within their children's and youth ministries. "We live by the 'three' rule," says children's minister Wesley Stewart (personal communication, March 24, 2020). "In other words, there should never be two individuals – adult or children – alone together. We also require all workers to submit a background check and participate in an annual training that teaches leaders signs to watch for, safety procedures, etc." Though these precautions have become widely adopted in many churches, especially those with larger congregations, there is still a lot of work to be done to better protect children as well as church staff and volunteers.

### **Part 3: Key Responses from Churches and Experts**

The sexual abuse crisis that plagues the Protestant Christian church is one of brokenness, pain, and sorrow, but the church, the bride of Christ, is a body built on grace, restoration, and love. The two cannot mix, and as a result, the church finds itself in a fierce battle against sin and evil with the intention to bring light where there is darkness and peace where there is turmoil. The people of God must fight nobly and selflessly to show those who have been victimized that Christians care for them and love them and want to be present with them throughout their

situations. This may only happen by becoming educated and informed, undergoing necessary training and reform, and adopting a mindset of restoration and justice from the Lord's perspective. Thankfully, the battle is the Lord's, just as all else. He has the power to rid the church of the evil of sexual abuse, and He will faithfully equip His people to be the hands and feet in that process if only they will allow Him.

Though sexual abuse is a dark, evil presence in society, particularly in churches, Christians can have hope in the healing power of Christ. "No darkness can exist where there is light," says Christa Neal, LPC, LMFT, and director of the Percy and Donna Malone Child Safety Center of Arkadelphia, Arkansas (personal communication, November 9, 2019). "Even in the most desperate situations, evil cannot thrive where there is a pursuit for justice and goodness." Fostering healing for survivors is one of the most important tasks of a church. Survivors of any traumatic experience, abuse or otherwise, must be shown the love of Christ from the people of God, and that begins with the pursuit of that justice and goodness.

Unfortunately, the church has taken on a bit of a stigma when it comes to its handling of abuse. One woman shared her thoughts in the Caring Well report produced by the Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission. "I am proof that sexual abuse has been overlooked for many years in Southern Baptist churches," she claimed as she shared her own story as a survivor of sexual abuse at the hands of both her youth pastor and her senior pastor later on. No matter how well individuals believe churches have handled abuse in the past, there are many who do not, even cannot, trust the church to minister and support in some of life's darkest situations.

Licensed professional counselor, Sean Culpepper, shared of abuse survivors' coming to pastors and Christians to find peace and healing that "it's been more of a trust-based experience," but if that trust is not there, than we as Christians have no chance to reach the very people to

whom God calls us to minister (personal interview, February 5, 2021). That must be changed, not only through better education, training, or even handling of abusive situations; the hearts of the men and women of God must be broken for their brothers and sisters who are abused and for the children who are so easily picked out as prey.

The people of God must work diligently to ensure the safety of those that the Lord entrusts to them, the men, women, and children that He so highly values. To carry on the mission of Christ by fulfilling the Great Commission, people of God must shed light where there is darkness and add clarity where there is confusion within churches. As I thought about and researched this issue, I quickly found that there is much more to understand about the tragedy of sexual abuse within churches. What I have managed to cover in this paper barely scratches the surface of the topic.

There are countless stories that could be told to evidence the continual suffering of people at the hands of those they trust to be people of God. Dr. Rex Horne shared two of his experiences of sexual abuse within his congregations as a pastor of over thirty years. One was of a husband and wife; the other of a father who abused his own daughter that ended with her becoming pregnant (personal communication, January 27, 2021). Both cases are so very tragic, as are all situations of abuse, but both also happened within churches. So much takes place that Christians do not know about, and thankfully, God does not require His people to be all-knowing, but He does require them to love and protect others. We cannot do that if we do not acknowledge and act upon the evil that surrounds our families, communities, and churches.

Much more data is needed all around to have a better understanding of the full scope of the problem, but the people of God can take comfort in the fact that God is in control. He feels every hurt and pain and weeps with His children who suffer at the hands of others. His people

must do their part to care for those who experience abuse. The problems of survivors cannot simply be prayed away or covered up by Scripture, but care that involves both spiritual healing as well as professional counseling can pave a way for survivors who have experienced the worst this world has to offer.

### **Conclusion: My Story**

The summer before my senior year of high school, I believed myself to be on top of the world; nothing could touch me. I could only imagine the possibilities of life. Where would I go to school? What would I study? None of it mattered too much just yet. I was still riding the high of making it to that quintessential point in life when one just tastes the first fruits of freedom, the status of seniority, and I loved every bit of it. Life was good and easy...except Mrs. Shelton's AP Statistics class, but easy in the sense that I was completely oblivious to the suffering and hurting of the people around me. Sure, I had done my fair share of mission trips and community service; I had worked with the homeless in Seattle, Washington numerous times. And, I certainly did not think that everyone led the kind of life I did: great family, strong church, good school, nice friends, etc. None of it mattered, however formative my experiences were; none of it prepared me for the experience God used to set the course of the remainder of my life, the course I am following now.

One afternoon, I was driving in my car, blaring music...probably a Taylor Swift song if I had to guess. I had turned out of my neighborhood and driven up the road about half a mile on the way to my grandparents' house when I came to pass the old, country Methodist church that sits across the four-way stop from Harmony Grove Elementary School. As I slowed to approach the stop sign, I noticed a woman running at my car from the parking lot of the church. Her arms were flailing; she was screaming something I could not understand. In my state of shock and unpreparedness, I stopped in the middle of the road and rolled down the window to see what the fuss was about. I noticed two cars, one an older, dark SUV and the other a beat-up sedan, in the gravel parking lot; a man was fiddling under one of the hoods. As the woman approached the window, I finally began to comprehend what she was trying to say.

“My husband is trying to blow up my car! You’ve gotta help me! Can you take me somewhere else?!” Her panic and desperation were evident through the wild look in her eyes. She was all adrenaline and desperation.

I understood the words coming out of her mouth, but none of them actually registered in my mind. I informed her that I could not let her into my car, a selfish act of self-preservation that I have come to regret in years since. Now I realize that I should have allowed her into the car and driven us both straight to the sheriff’s office.

For whatever reason, the woman did not push me about letting her into the car, but she did ask to borrow my cell phone to call 911. I gladly handed it over, thinking that she would use it and I would be on my way, but as she called the man hopped in his SUV and flew out of the parking lot which I had pulled into at the point to get out of the road.

Neither the woman nor I had any idea what he was doing, but the woman was on the phone with the sheriff’s office, and I was just glad he was gone. That whole time I had been thinking, “What if he pulls out a gun and starts shooting at us?” My mind was stuck on each variation of a worst-case scenario that my imagination could devise.

Meanwhile, the woman was arguing with whoever was on the other end of her phone call. Her frustration was evident in her rising tone and clipped words. Her husband was gone, but her stress over the situation was not. She finally got off the phone with the sheriff and let me know that a deputy would be on his way. I decided that I would wait in the parking lot with her in case the deputy needed to ask me any questions about what I had witnessed.

Not too long after that, I heard a vehicle pulling into the parking lot, but it was not the sheriff’s deputy. It was the woman’s husband back in the SUV. This time, he stopped not too far from where I was parked, and I was scared, though he had never acknowledged that I was there

much less act aggressively toward me in any way. I had remained in the car, but the woman was standing right next to me, and the next thing I knew, the man and woman were yelling at each other, screaming obscenities. I do not remember the gist of the conversation, but at some point, the man must have informed his wife that he had gone to pick up their child and brought the child back with him, for the woman whipped open the door to the backseat. There sat a little boy crying. The mother grabbed him out, and when she did, the husband peeled back out of the parking lot.

The woman hurriedly asked if she could put her son in the backseat to get him out of the scorching heat and harsh sun. I immediately consented, and after placing him in the backseat, she got back on the phone with either the sheriff's office or the friend who had been keeping the boy; I do not remember which. I do remember that my attention then shifted to the little boy in the backseat. He could not have been more than four- or five-years-old, and I had no idea how to console him or what to even say to him; he seemed completely inconsolable. I did the first thing that popped in my head.

“What's your name?” I asked.

He croaked out, “Nathan.” Unfortunately, that was about as far as our conversation got. He sat in the backseat and cried; I sat in the driver's seat, still overwhelmed with shock and confusion that I found myself in such a predicament. I do not remember much else that happened except that the sheriff finally arrived, and the husband came back not too long afterward as well. I never could figure out why he would come back when he knew that law enforcement was on its way.

The woman got Nathan out of the backseat and took him with her while she talked to the sheriff. She did not say another word to me or even acknowledge that I was still there. The



sheriff never came over and asked me what happened, but I sat and watched as the sheriff talked with the man and woman. I was shocked when I realized that both the man and the woman were free to go after getting what seemed like a little slap on the wrist for making the sheriff waste his time with their problems. I fully expected the man to be arrested for attempted murder or some other charge I had seen used on a television show at some point or another, but the couple's situation was clearly not one with which the sheriff was unfamiliar. Finally understanding that the problem was not significant enough to warrant listening to my version of events, I decided to leave when the sheriff got back into his vehicle.

After I got away from the church, I broke down and cried. I was relieved that I had not been harmed and could finally put the situation behind me, but I was devastated that I simply got to drive away while Nathan went back home with his volatile parents. All I could think about was that the Lord placed me in a family that loves and cherishes me in ways that I had never previously understood until seeing a family that operated in a completely opposite manner. That little boy went to school with my baby sister; there was a chance he would end up in my mother's fourth grade class someday. We lived in the same small community, but our lives could not have been more different.

I realize that I should have done just about everything differently than I had that day. If common sense and clear thinking had been my primary reaction, I certainly would have. Ultimately, my fear, shock, and ignorance to the chaotic evil of the world got the best of me, and every time I think back to that day, I second-guess each choice and decision I made about caring for the woman, her son Nathan, and myself. I do not remember every detail of that day either, but I remember what counts. I remember that I came across a deeply troubled, hurting family, and I had never experienced anything like it firsthand nor did I know what to do about it.

I have always tried to figure out why that experience made such an impact on the very direction of my life, and I struggle to find the words to explain how I know that God has called me to help others through counseling when others ask about my choices. But something that licensed professional counselor, Sean Culpepper, shared with me sums up what I experience and why I chose to share my experience.

“Suffering is just so sad,” he simply said (personal communication, February 5, 2021). And it truly is. The sight of Nathan’s suffering at his own parents’ hands was so, so sad. My heart broke for him and the situation into which he was born. I realize that situations of sexual abuse in churches are completely different from my experience, but both evidence the suffering of people and the need for others to care. Children’s pastor, Wesley Stewart shared, “The Bible teaches us that we are to have a heart and mind for ‘the least of these’ and what better definition for that could there be than for a voiceless child?” (personal communication, March 24, 2020). “The least of these” applies to others as well; men, women, and children who find themselves in tragic situations of hurt and pain must remain in the hearts of believers. We must be willing to share in their suffering just as Jesus Christ shared in ours. As Mr. Culpepper put it, “God is in the work of redemption, and I want to be a part of that” (personal communication, February 5, 2021). Well I do too and so should every other Christian who sees the hurting and suffering of the world in light of the love and peace of Jesus Christ.

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