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Abuse in the Church

Abstract

"We must have the courage to bring questionable behavior to the light so that nothing more will be done in secret."

Posting about implementing safe church policies from *In All Things* - an online journal for critical reflection on faith, culture, art, and every ordinary-yet-graced square inch of God's creation.

<https://inallthings.org/abuse-in-the-church/>

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in things

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Abuse in the Church

Tara Boer

“Those things just don’t happen here.”

I remember believing that.

I grew up in a small town in northwest Iowa. I am a product of small-town values, “village” raising, and neighborly trust. We left our doors unlocked, I walked to friends’ houses after school without knowing their parents well, and I received rides home from youth group leaders without questioning their background or intent.

Unfortunately, this trust has been broken.

Whether it’s because we’re more aware of how often and to what degree people are being violated, or if the sexualized culture has dramatically increased the rate in which people are being abused and hurt—the fact is, it’s hard to trust people like we want to.

Some would say they don’t trust the church either.

Unfortunately, the church has been tangled up in the scandals and violations of adults and children. From mass corruption and exploitation by church leaders, theological abuse, and victim blaming to countless stories of grooming and sexual assault perpetuated by representatives of the church, there is undoubtedly a plethora of stories under the #churchtoo movement which point to the many ways in which the church has covertly and overtly contributed to the exploitation of congregational members and visitors.

Our churches should be the safest places for people to gather, worship, and build relationships. There should be no questions of mistrust or feelings of betrayal. What can we do?

We need policies and teams in place to help keep people safe:

When churches create a “safe church team” and a policy defining appropriate conduct and responses to abuse, we name the problem (and acknowledge it as a condition of sin) and set forth the notion that *these things could happen here*. Additionally, safe church teams and policies communicate to the church and unchurched that we aren’t ignorant of sin’s contributions to the life of the church. Educating, equipping, gate-keeping, and monitoring the ways churches care for their youth and congregation holds people accountable and is the first step to preventing abuse within the church. Check out the Christian Reformed Church’s resources on [safe church policies](#) that help guide many churches towards making their places of worship safer for everyone. If your church doesn’t have a safe team or an updated policy, make that a priority.

We need to be ready and prepared for the messy situations:

The healing process can start as soon as someone comes forward with his/her story of abuse or mistreatment. If the church or a representative of the church is in some way culpable for the violation, the church has a special responsibility for also contributing to the redeeming aspects of the victim’s story. If we’re frantically searching for the appropriate way to respond, we may miss the opportunity to truly reflect the justice and healing exhibited in scripture. Know how to respond to a minor if they report misconduct to you and include in your policies to have *all* suspected child abuse reported to state authorities. Additionally, consider implementing an advisory panel when allegations of abuse arise concerning two adults. Let’s be prepared when a mess splatters at our feet.

Too often we tolerate poor boundaries, turn our eyes to questionable behaviors, and make assumptions about the “intent” of others:

Sexual abusers don’t walk around with a sign on their back or a resume of sexually questionable behaviors they’ve engaged in over the course of their life. There is no race, gender, age, sexual orientation, or socioeconomic status to predict that someone may prey on someone else for their selfish pleasure. Having worked with victims of abuse in many different capacities, the most common response to the perpetrator has been “I didn’t think he/she would do this.” After reviewing all the questionable behaviors and odd interactions, in some situations they add up to the crisis that has transpired. Although it’s obviously easier to trace questionable behavior than predict it, when you

see someone display inappropriate boundaries with children or others, you are likely only scratching the surface of their dark life. The secrets behind what offenders allow others to see is likely much more endangering and troubling. We must have the courage to bring questionable behavior to the light so that nothing more will be done in secret—even if that person in question is someone we care about or have meaningful connections with.

We fail to educate adults and children about safe behaviors with others and often don't talk about it enough in our homes:

We often trust schools to be diligent in talking to our kids about their bodies and safe behaviors. Sometimes the school assumes families are providing this guidance. Most churches remain silent in talking about abuse and violence. Encouragingly, several churches are taking active steps towards integrating curriculum in their Sunday school classrooms to help children learn age appropriate ways to assert their own boundaries, as well as recognize when others are exhibiting questionable or violating behavior. These God-honoring strategies strengthen children and families. Consider implementing such a curriculum in your own church and/or dedicating a Sunday for abuse awareness.

In Ephesians Paul states, “Have nothing to do with the fruitless deeds of darkness, but rather expose them...But everything exposed by the light becomes visible—and everything that is illuminated becomes a light” (Ephesians 5:11-13, NIV).

Satan hides in the darkness, and his work is perpetuated by sins hidden under church protection or ignorance. Let's pray for the day when the church is known for being an exceptionally safe, holy place that brings life and light in every way possible. May we be a place where people get saved, find true and meaningful community, and bring others in as an act of celebration of the eternal promises we share.

“With God, all things are possible” (Matthew 19:26, NIV).