

# Protecting Our Most Vulnerable

The Key Truth About Sexual Abuse Most Churches Miss: It's About the Victims

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*Editor's note: The following article is not intended to offer legal advice, nor is it a replacement for professional counsel for any specific situation. It is intended to initiate an honest look at common responses to sexual abuse in the church and to offer principles to help Christian leaders make policies to protect potential victims in their community.*

The church—like the larger culture—is facing a time of reckoning when it comes to sexual abuse in its midst, and its inadequate response to it.

While the awareness may be new, the problem is not. Our common *we-don't-want-to-talk-about-it* approach has failed to prevent heinous things from happening among us. In the 20 years I have been in ministry, I've seen situations ranging from college-student sexual assault to missionaries “counseling” vulnerable young women and then harassing or assaulting them, to sexual predators pretending to be Christians to gain access to children or young people.

And those are just the gravely serious ones—we could mention the prevalence of unwanted sexual advances, or disturbing sexual comments intended to degrade others in ministry, for example.

The resistance to confronting reality has led us to allow the standard of protection for vulnerable people in our church communities to be far too low. And it has held us back





from caring for victims and pursuing justice when bad things happen.

Recent headlines sadly have highlighted that bad happens even among our most respected leaders and institutions.

We need to know how to deal with sexual harassment and abuse in the church with integrity. How do we protect our congregants, our staff and our organizations? How do we prevent sexual violations and crimes from happening, and if that prevention fails, what do we do? How do we care for people in the midst of that nightmare?

To answer these questions, we reached out to two seasoned leaders who have a reputation for tested wisdom in this area.

**Dr. Gerry Breshears** is a professor and theologian at Western Seminary in Portland, Oregon, who has deep experience counseling pastors, elder boards, church staff and sexual abuse victims. He has earned a reputation in Portland as “the person to call” when ministry situations arise that seem impossible to navigate.

**Boz Tchividjian** is a former child abuse prosecutor and the executive director of GRACE (Godly Response to Abuse in the Christian Environment), an organization dedicated to helping Christian communities recognize, prevent and respond to abuse.

We asked questions that fell into three broad categories related to sexual abuse: prevention, recognition and godly response as leaders. First, Dr. Gerry Breshears.

## Broaching the Basics

**How can churches prevent abuse in the first place?**

**Breshears:** A children’s policy has to be there. And it has to be followed. That policy should require background checks, personal references, six months or longer attending the church before someone can volunteer, cameras in children’s ministry spaces, stating that no one goes in a bathroom with a child alone, and never

being alone and unsupervised with any student.

**Is it common for churches to have these basics in place?**

**Breshears:** I’m stunned by how many churches don’t have the basics. They rationalize it with statements like, “Oh, we trust Jesus” or, “It’s such a hassle” or, “Background checks are too expensive.” You can get creative to answer these rationalizations. Is the background check too expensive for the church? Have volunteers pay for it as part of their application, then. If they’re not willing to spend \$25 to protect the children, they shouldn’t be working with them.

**Obviously predators find ways around the basics. How do you recognize a sex offender? What warning signs should people be looking for?**

**Breshears:** Don’t start by looking for a typical profile of an offender. Start by looking for who fits the profile of a victim. I’d pick someone likely to be bullied, scared or frightened, and do some careful interviewing. I’d start with a simple, non-threatening question: “Has anything made you uncomfortable here at our church?” I’d look very carefully into anything they mention.

**Do any behaviors set off alarms for you?**

**Breshears:** If someone says we don’t need background checks then that’s a red flag. And the same goes for anyone resistant to putting protections and policies into place. Everyone benefits from the clarity and culture that well-thought-out policies provide. Everyone except the guy trying to

get away with something.

**What would you tell churches who say making these policies isn’t a priority? Maybe they’ve never had to deal with this, maybe they feel that they don’t have the resources or know-how?**

**Breshears:** Even Jesus had Judas in his crowd. If he couldn’t keep it safe, do you think you can? A high-trust environment is a garden of luxury for a sexual predator.

They’re good at conning people. Predators, male or female, present themselves as safe. They control the narrative. People think they’re great.

Victims are often the only ones who truly know the predator, so it’s not surprising when those in authority shrug off accusations: The predator has groomed the situation to be the trustworthy one, and often selects victims who will not be easily listened to or believed. The predator is well known to be kind and helpful. No one else has ever had a problem with him, and people start doing his cover-up for him. “Surely there’s been a misunderstanding. He’s a respected man of God.”

## When Accusations Are Made

**How do we respond to accusations with integrity?**

**Breshears:** First, really listen to the accusation. All the way through. Ask for details—all of them. When and where did this happen? Who was around? What exactly did he or she do? Hear the whole story. Create a climate where it’s clear your church absolutely wants to hear what’s going on.

If the situation involves minors, you report it to the police. It’s not even a question. My strong suggestion is to already have a relationship with your local Child Protective Services (CPS) and police. Just call up their offices and ask, “Can we share a meal and get to know each other?” They will be delighted—and if you ever need to make a report, you’ll already have a relationship.

In cases of sexual harassment where a crime may have been committed, same thing—report it to the police right away. If it’s not criminal, you still act quickly: Have at least two people involved internally, and call in at least one knowledgeable pastor from a nearby church to come be with you in the process. That can be done free. It’s a good principle to bring in someone outside the church to prevent the danger of

groupthink. Bring in someone more objective who has wisdom and experience in this arena.

**There have been several high profile situations recently where investigations into a respected leader exonerated him despite multiple accusers, and we later discovered the accusations to be true. How does that happen? How do we prevent that?**

**Breshears:** Sometimes there is a “narcissistic penumbra” that powerful leaders create around themselves. You don’t realize what’s happening until you step away for a while.

If someone says “I don’t need a process,” or “You didn’t follow the process exactly,” that’s a red flag. Whether they don’t want to follow process or are hyper-literal about it—when the process becomes the issue more than the accusation, something’s upside down and you should double down on your care and attention.

Remember that the verses in Matthew 18 about dealing with conflict are principles, not legal proceedings. Don’t use Jesus’ words to justify an easy out or a cover-up.

## Immediate Steps for Victim Care After Sexual Abuse or Harassment

Wherever possible, remove the person from the abusive situation. Help them get out. There is no recipe for every situation, but the basic principles are simple: Don’t make victims responsible to protect themselves and heal alone.

Besides taking any legal or disciplinary steps necessary for the abuser, get the victim professional help. Have good relationships with an excellent Christian therapist trained in trauma care and make that available to the victim. Have a relationship with that therapist ahead of time. Don’t just refer victims, but have somebody you know is well trained in these areas to walk with them through the process.

My personal suggestion is to ask the victim to do a “release of information” so the therapist can disclose general outcomes to a trusted, noninvolved person in the church. This helps ensure communication and holistic care.

—Dr. Gerry Breshears

**What about when there is media attention coming as a result of accusations? Doesn’t that make the church look bad?**

**Breshears:** Do not be concerned about protecting the reputation of God or the organization. If my motivation is to protect the organization, then I will protect it at the expense of the widow, the stranger, the orphan and the poor—which goes right against the agenda of Jesus.

## The Role of the Leader in Dealing with Abuse

One of the positive things coming out of the #MeToo movement of this last year and a half has been the realistic perspective that abuse and harassment happen in all types of environments and commu-

nities, far more than many of us think. It's a hard truth.

With the basics for churches outlined from Breshears, we called Boz Tchividjian, executive director of GRACE. He is laser-focused on protecting the most vulnerable in our communities.

**Some faith communities minimize the importance of having abuse policies, rationalizing that it couldn't happen to them. What does this reveal?**

**Tchividjian:** Abuse knows no boundaries. There is no place that's off limits. That includes the church. We've seen 20-plus years of addressing this issue over and over and over again within the Catholic Church. Over the past five years, we've seen more and more abuse disclosures, and even systemic abuse allegations surfacing in Protestant churches, including mainline, evangelical and nondenominational congregations.

So to say, "This is not something that happens in my world or my church" almost sounds like intentional naiveté, rather than facing a troubling reality. If that sentiment reflects that of your church leadership, you should leave. They're ignoring an obvious reality. Does that make you think they will respond correctly if it happens in your congregation?

**What are some warning signs that abuse or harassment might be happening?**

**Tchividjian:** It's not a matter of *if* people in my church are being abused, it's a question of *when* and *by whom*. We must start from the premise that there's a strong likelihood that in or around my church, vulnerable people are being abused. That doesn't mean it's happening on church property. It could be in homes. Schools. Within families. It could be members of our community who are perpetrating abuse in other locations, or, quite frankly, on people who aren't even members of our church. We have to start with the premise that this happens. It's present.

Knowing it happens, we

should be driven to become educated. We want to learn as much as we can, get as much training as we can, and at the end of the day, help transform the culture of our church into a safer place for the vulnerable

If somebody said, "Hey, there's an strong statistical likelihood that every church has a serial killer in the congregation," we'd say, "Wow, as a church leadership, we want to get educated, get trained and equipped as best we can, to know more about how these people act, more about how we can protect those within our community from these individuals." We'd be up at night, working on how to identify behaviors that might be concerning. We would be like sponges learning about it. And we would reach out to experts.

**What sort of expertise should we be looking for here?**

**Tchividjian:** We wouldn't ask for a biblical scholar to train and equip us to find the killer, we'd ask an expert in serial killers. Perhaps a retired FBI agent who spent the years tracking and understanding them. That seriousness has to become the lens the church looks through for abuse and harassment. These dark things exist.

**Reporting accusations to the police or child protective services can be one way to get in touch with experts, right?**

**Tchividjian:** Yes, you report so that people who have training and expertise investigate it. Most church leaders are simply not equipped for these specialized and sensitive situations. They need to understand that. They need to take a step back and let the experts do their job. You could literally save the life of a child by reporting abuse accusations. Every minute you wait is risky.

It's legally required to report crimes regarding children. But we shouldn't need that legality to prompt us. People ask me if they are "mandatory reporters" and I say, "It doesn't matter. Are you only going to report it if the law requires it? What

does Jesus require?"

If somebody said, "I just witnessed John Smith at our church shoot and kill the cashier at the 7-Eleven," we wouldn't think, "Oh dear. Let's talk to John Smith about this. Let's apply Matthew 18!" No, we would say, "Wow. Call the police."

**That's the second time you've used an illustration comparing sexual abuse with murder. Are we looking at these sorts of crimes seriously enough if we're not putting them in a similar category?**

**Tchividjian:** If you talk about homicide there's a universal agreement that's really bad. But when it comes to sexual abuse—especially in the church—there are so many double standards creating confusion or minimizing it.

In fact, some argue that sexual abuse and sexual assault of both adults and children can be worse than homicide, because homicide—as horrible as it is—is done. In sexual abuse and assault cases, the victim has to get up each day and process that trauma and live life processing their trauma.

I get tired of people minimizing sexual abuse as "sexually inappropriate behavior." Don't use words like "inappropriate" for something that is criminal. Don't say "sexually inappropriate" when, just for example, it's rape. Don't whitewash it to make it less uncomfortable.

**What do you tell leaders concerned with wanting to care for both the accuser and the accused?**

**Tchividjian:** Keep in mind your role as leaders in the church. Be the shepherd. Protect the sheep. It takes intentionality, but look at these matters through the lens of the victim. Every decision you make, every word you say—look at these matters through the lens of the victim. That perspective should guide your decisions. Your

priority is ultimately for the wounded.

Too often church leadership tries to walk a middle line of caring for both the accused and the alleged victim. Almost inevitably they fail at both. And even if the alleged victim is making things up—let's say the accusation is one of the rare ones that are completely fabricated—we need to get that person help.

**What about "innocent until proven guilty"?**

**Tchividjian:** That's a legal term in a criminal context that requires a certain burden of proof. In the criminal context, that person can actually be removed from society, have their liberties taken away and be put in prison. That's not what we're talking about with a church investigation. Those legal standards absolutely should apply in a legal context, when we're determining who gets convicted and sentenced to prison. In court someone should be innocent until proven guilty, and the proof should exclude all reasonable doubt.

Don't transplant that criminal legal standard into the context of church life. That's dangerous. Too many churches apply law to the victims and grace to the offenders. It should be the opposite. We should be applying law to the alleged offenders and grace to alleged victims.

**How does applying grace to victims change the approach?**

**Tchividjian:** As leaders, we need to look at it this way: Somebody has just come to us and disclosed one of the most horrifying, traumatizing things that can happen to a human being. Our question should be, "How do we make our community a safe place for this person?" If we

discover later that the accuser fabricated all of it, then we'll address that at the time, and address it thoroughly and fairly.

But research tells us that false allegations of child

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sexual abuse occur somewhere between 1 and 7 percent of the time. The statistics aren't much different when it comes to accusations of sexual abuse or assault among adults. So that tells us that, worst-case scenario, there's a 93 percent chance this person is telling us the truth. We have to make our decisions accordingly.

**And there are so many other possible scenarios. What if it's harassment instead of abuse?**

**Tchividjian:** We haven't even touched on sexual harassment. Then there's clergy abuse, and spiritual abuse. We're seeing more and more situations of clergy abuse—people exploiting power and authority to manipulate individuals, oftentimes sexually.

These perpetrators, whether sexual harassers or spiritual abusers, excel at shaming the victim and making them feel like they are to blame. They fill the victim with self-blame and know they'll never say a word. They manipulate their victims into silence.

The same principle applies to any case like this: Deal with these things through the lens of the victim.

## Empowering Survivors

**How do we move forward if our communities have all, in one way or another, been impacted by this issue?**

**Tchividjian:** The starting place is to realize exactly that: There are abuse survivors in every single church in this country. We may not know it, but they're there. Oftentimes they sit and suffer silently.

We have to ask, "What can we do to create an environment where these survivors feel safe, and where they can become empowered enough to share what happened?"

**Do you have a practical example of this being done well?**

**Tchividjian:** Yeah. I have a friend who is a Presbyterian pastor and an abuse survivor. She came to a new congregation where a church member had been arrested for sexually abusing a minor at Sunday school. Nobody in the church was talking about it. It was almost like it didn't happen. So the pastor made the conscious decision

to talk about it.

She developed an eight-week sermon series. She unpacked from Scripture how God defines abuse, how God sees and responds to abuse. It was a powerful, bold sermon series to preach at a new church. Afterward, 25 different women—from a church of 85—came forward and told her that they were survivors of either child sexual abuse or adult sexual assault. These were women between the ages of 65 and 85. Half of them had never told anyone about their experience until they heard these sermons.

This pastor took a bold step forward. She spoke about abuse, defined it from the pulpit, and created a safe space for survivors.

Imagine an 85-year-old woman in your congregation who has been part of the church her whole life and never felt safe enough to share about the most traumatic thing that's ever happened to her. Churches and faith communities have to be intentional about creating a safe space for people. That begins with talking about it.

**So the first step in helping survivors talk about abuse might very well be church leaders talking about it first?**

**Tchividjian:** Right. But it goes beyond that. You need to make it an ongoing part of your church life by preaching about it. And before you preach about it, go learn about it.

Talk to survivors. Listen. Don't preach about sexual abuse before talking to survivors. Don't get up there when you have no idea what you're talking about. You could actually create more problems if you do that; you could further traumatize victims who are sitting and listening.

Survivors have so much to offer the church community. Their resilience and grit are incredible. Just as one practical example, when developing policies and procedures, ask abuse survivors in your church for input and guidance. They have far more knowledge on these topics than we do. Bringing their voice into the process of cultural transformation is critical. They've got much to teach us on all kinds of matters, and we need to be teachable. We need to value them.

**Why is it so common that a survivor come forward only to have church leaders take the side of the perpetrator?**

**Tchividjian:** Sexual abusers manipulate more than just their direct victims. Most human beings gravitate toward the narratives we feel comfortable with. Abusers know that. They use it to their advantage. Oftentimes we'll follow those narratives even when they conflict with the facts. Because we don't want to believe certain things are true, even if the evidence says they are.

Say a 14-year-old boy in the youth group, who comes from a troubled home and has caused some trouble at church, steps forward and reports that an elder in the church has been sexually victimizing him for the last six months. This elder has been serving as a mentor for this boy. He's a pillar of the community.

Our immediate natural inclination is to move toward a narrative of, "This kid's got problems, we all know it." The elder denies it all, of course. The narrative we will move to very quickly is, "This is an innocent man falsely accused by a troubled youth." That narrative is more comfortable than the thought that this elder, this man who we've looked up to and admired, has used his position to exploit and abuse somebody under his care. So, before we even get to any consideration of the facts, we have a storyline established in our mind. That's deadly.

**So our first response here should be to call the police? Even if we have doubts about the accusations? Even though it's going to make our church look bad?**

**Tchividjian:** Yes. Our primary responsibility is not protecting our institution, or our pastor's reputation or the accused. In that moment, it should be caring for this reported victim.

I use the gospel as an example. The gospel is all about a God who sacrificed and extended himself for the individual. Oftentimes, that's the message we preach with our lips, but we do the exact opposite. We sacrifice the vulnerable individual in order to save ourselves. The gospel liberates us from that. This church doesn't belong to us, it belongs to Jesus. And if that means that the reputation of this community is going to take a hit because of how we handled it, or because somebody in leadership

may have engaged in criminal behavior, so be it. We're going to serve and love those who have been hurt. What most church leaders don't realize, especially in 2018, is

that people are watching, and they appreciate transparency and honesty. People know that this issue affects every corner of society. They know it's happening in churches. What people have little patience for, as they should, is hypocrisy, and secrecy, and self-protection.

When the church says, "Hey, we have nothing to hide, we're going to report this and take care of the wounded people," even the world sees that as pretty amazing. And to me, that's a much more beautiful and brighter reflection of Jesus than any other type of response.

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*Good News for a Change: How to Talk to Anyone about Jesus. You can learn more at [Mikalatos.com](http://Mikalatos.com).*

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## Further Resources

- *The Child Safeguarding Policy Guide for Churches and Ministries*, Boz Tchividjian and Shira Berkovits (New Growth Press, 2017).
- *Predators: Pedophiles, Rapists, and Other Sex Offenders*, Anna C. Salter, Ph.D. (Basic Books, 2018).
- *Suffering and the Heart of God: How Trauma Destroys and Christ Restores*, Diane Langberg, Ph.D. (New Growth Press, 2015).
- GRACE (Godly Response to Abuse in the Christian Environment): [NetGrace.org](http://NetGrace.org)
- GRACE has a comprehensive training called the Child Safeguarding Certification initiative to build policies and culture to keep children safe, and provide tools for the congregation and staff to recognize and respond to sexual abuse. They educate and train every demographic, including children, in age-appropriate ways. Learn more at [NetGrace.org/certification](http://NetGrace.org/certification).