



GRACE
Godly Response to Abuse
in the Christian Environment

GRACE Statement on Sexual Abuse within the SBC

“A voice is heard in Ramah, mourning and great weeping, Rachel weeping for her children and refusing to be comforted because they are no more.”

– Jeremiah 31:15

On May 15, 2022, Guidepost issued a report on the response of the Executive Committee of the Southern Baptist Convention to sexual abuse allegations as well as an audit of the procedures and actions of the credentials committee.

The report states that:

[F]or many years, a few senior EC leaders, along with outside counsel, largely controlled the EC’s response to these reports of abuse. They closely guarded information about abuse allegations and lawsuits...and were singularly focused on avoiding liability for the SBC to the exclusion of other considerations. In service of this goal, survivors and others who reported abuse were ignored, disbelieved, or met with the constant refrain that the SBC could take no action due to its polity regarding church autonomy—even if it meant that convicted molesters continued in ministry with no notice or warning to their current church or congregation.¹

This report was the direct result of the courageous actions of child abuse and sexual assault survivors who believed that what was done in the dark must be brought into the light (Luke 12:2-3). We pray this report provides some measure of comfort to the hurting and leads the SBC, and all of Christendom, to genuine repentance and meaningful change.

Although the report is narrowly focused on the EC and credentials committee, the findings highlight the need for reforms that GRACE and leading child protection professionals have urged the Church to implement. These are reforms that every denomination, every church, every Christian can work to implement in a relatively short order if we choose to do so. We highlight below five of these reforms.

¹ Guidepost, 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, p. 3 (May 15, 2022).

1. Theological reform beginning in seminary

Although it is well known that sex offenders often distort scripture to justify the abuse of children,² the Guidepost report highlights the misuse of scripture as justification for failing to protect children from abuse. As one example, the report contains an “internal memo” from the SBC general counsel in which he contends the focus on addressing the sin of sexual abuse was a “satanic scheme to completely distract us from evangelism.”³

These and similar sentiments have been expressed throughout the decades by many in the Christian church. As a result, there is a critical need for Christians everywhere to do some soul searching on how distorted theology has contributed to crimes against children. We believe that every Christian needs to study the life and words of Christ as they pertain to children and to the sin of child abuse and then use the actions and words of Christ to guide a God-pleasing response to maltreatment.⁴

To assist the church in theological reform, we believe that 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.⁵ Clergy must know how to minister to a survivor in a trauma-informed manner and to coordinate spiritual care with medical⁶ and evidence-based mental health care.⁷ GRACE, Zero Abuse Project and others have designed seminary courses which could be tailored for use in multiple denominations. Accordingly, seminaries would not have to start from scratch—but they would have to start.

Once properly educated, clergy should periodically conduct Bible studies on child maltreatment, address this topic from the pulpit, and otherwise create an environment in which everyone is supported in discussing abuse.

2. Elevate the teachings of Christ above the advice of lawyers

As reflected in the Guidepost report, faith communities often defer to attorneys in determining their response to child abuse. This is problematic for three reasons. First, most attorneys are not fluent in the research on child abuse and have not worked in the

² Victor Vieth, *What Would Walther Do? Applying Law & Gospel to Victims and Perpetrators of Child Sexual Abuse*, 40 JOURNAL OF PSYCHOLOGY & THEOLOGY 257 (2012).

³ Guidepost, note 1, at 6.

⁴ See generally, VICTOR I. VIETH, ON THIS ROCK: A CALL TO CENTER THE CHRISTIAN RESPONSE TO CHILD ABUSE ON THE LIFE AND WORDS OF JESUS (WIPF & STOCK 2018).

⁵ Vincent J. Felitti & Robert F. Anda, *The Relationship of Adverse Childhood Experiences to Adult Medical Disease*, in RUTHE A. LANIUS, ERIC VERMETEN, AND CLARE PAIN, EDS, THE IMPACT OF EARLY LIFE TRAUMA ON HEALTH AND DISEASE: THE HIDDEN EPIDEMIC 78 (2010); Amy Russell, *The Spiritual Impact of Child Abuse & Exploitation: What Research Tells Us*, 45 CURRENTS IN THEOLOGY AND MISSION 14 (2018); Donald F. Walker, Henri Webb Reid, Tiffany O’Neill, and Lindsay Brown, *Changes in Personal Religion/Spirituality During and After Childhood Abuse: A Review and Synthesis*, 1 PSYCHOLOGICAL TRAUMA: THEORY, RESEARCH, PRACTICE & POLICY 130 (2009).

⁶ Victor I. Vieth, *Coordinating Medical and Pastoral Care in Cases of Child Abuse and Neglect*, 45 CURRENTS IN THEOLOGY AND MISSION 27 (2018).

⁷ Pete Singer, *Coordinating Pastoral Care of Survivors with Mental Health Providers*, 45 CURRENTS IN THEOLOGY & MISSION 31 (2018).

field of child protection. As a result, they are poorly positioned to advise a church or other organizations on this topic.

Second, attorneys often do not understand that most victims are not seeking money damages so much as institutional reform.⁸ As a result, attorneys repeatedly advise churches to say very little and to do virtually nothing of consequence. This culture of silence often serves to *increase* the chance an institution will be sued because survivors are left with few options.⁹

Third, and most importantly, the advice of attorneys often runs counter to the teachings of Jesus. Our Lord said it would be better to be drowned in the sea with a millstone around our neck than to hurt a child (Mt. 18:6-9; Luke 17:1-2; Mark 9:42). We believe this warning applies not only to those who directly abuse children but also to leaders in the church who, like the religious authorities of the day, walk to other side of the road when confronted with evidence of abuse. When the Good Samaritan found an abused man on the side of the road, he did not ask about incurring liability if he chose to intervene—he simply intervened because a true follower of God does not ignore suffering (Luke 10:25-37).

3. Child abuse policies must be guided by child abuse experts and must address ALL forms of child maltreatment

When law firms and insurance companies design church policies, they often narrowly focus only on child sexual abuse within the organization. This is because children abused by church leaders or volunteers are the victims most likely to one day sue the church. Thinking such as this leaves unprotected children being sexually abused in their own home. It also leaves unprotected children who are being physically abused, emotionally abused, neglected, tortured, or witnessing domestic violence. When Jesus instructed his followers to care for the “least of these” he did not limit his compassion to only one type of abuse and he certainly didn’t suggest that concern for liability should cause us to prioritize one child abuse victim over another.

Even if a church was sinfully focused only on the children who might one day sue them, the church would be hampered in protecting children from sexual abuse in the church if we did not provide equal balance to addressing abuse in the home. This is because we know that children abused in their home are at an increased risk to be abused within a church or other setting.¹⁰ This is why GRACE¹¹ and other national child abuse experts

⁸ See generally, Kelly Clark, *Institutional Child Sexual Abuse—Not Just a Catholic Thing*, 36 WILLIAM MITCHELL LAW REVIEW 220 (2009).

⁹ Id.

¹⁰ BASYLE TCHIVIDJIAN & SHIRA M. BERKOVITS, *THE CHILD SAFEGUARDING POLICY GUIDE FOR CHURCHES & MINISTRIES* 9 (NEW GROWTH PRESS 2017).

¹¹ Id.

have urged faith communities to adopt policies that address all forms of abuse and irrespective of where the abuse occurred.¹²

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. We believe that every church should adhere to these standards with a particular emphasis on youth ministers, volunteers and others who may be serving children. Some churches have been proactive in meeting these standards in their youth ministries¹³ and we believe every church should follow suit. Faith without works is dead (James 2:17) and we urge every church to demonstrate a living faith that is demonstrated by the development of trauma-informed ministries.

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 which provides evidence-based medical and mental health services and coordinates multi-disciplinary team (MDT) responses to child maltreatment. CACs are often proactive in child abuse prevention initiatives and can add a wealth of resources for faith communities.

Child protection professionals are increasingly aware of the growing body of research concerning the need to address the spiritual impact of trauma¹⁴ and some CACs have even developed chaplaincy programs.¹⁵ We believe every church should reach out to local CACs and other child protection professionals and develop effective collaborations to prevent abuse and, when abuse cannot be prevented, to respond with excellence.

ADDENDUM: Addressing the abuse of adults

¹² Angelo P. Giardino, Victor Vieth, Shira Berkovits, Danielle Pitkoff, *Child Abuse Prevention in the Faith-Based Environment*, in PREVENTING CHILD ABUSE: CRITICAL ROLES AND MULTIPLE PERSPECTIVES (NOVA SCIENCE PUBLISHERS 2021).

¹³ See Robert G. Crosby III, Erin I. Smith, Jeffrey Gage, & Leon Blanchette, *Trauma-Informed Children's Ministry: A Qualitative Descriptive Study*, 14 JOURNAL OF CHILD & ADOLESCENT TRAUMA 493 (2021).

¹⁴ Victor I. Vieth & Pete Singer, *Wounded Souls: The Need for Child Protection Professionals and Faith Leaders to Recognize and Respond to the Spiritual Impact of Child Abuse*, 45 MITCHELL HAMLINE LAW REVIEW 1214 (2019)

¹⁵ Victor I. Vieth, Mark Everson, Viola Vaughan-Eden, Suzanne Tiapula, Shauna Galloway-Williams, Carrie Nettles, *Keeping Faith: the Potential Role of a Chaplain to Address the Spiritual Needs of Maltreated Children and advise Child Abuse Multi-Disciplinary Teams*, 14(2) LIBERTY L. REV. 349 (2019)

GRACE's statement focuses on the unique vulnerabilities of children and the God-given responsibility of the adults in their lives to safeguard them. While these recommendations specifically focus on protecting children, many adults have been and are being abused in the Church, as mentioned in the SBC report. We must not lose sight of adults impacted by clergy abuse, gender-based violence and abuse, spiritual abuse, intimate partner violence, and other forms of abuse and misconduct. Each of the reforms recommended in this report can be used as a model for the Church to prevent and respond to all forms of abuse.