

The sad reality of sexual abuse

By Walt Mueller

My head is spinning. Recently, a man I know—a professing Christian, and a man very involved in ministry—was sent away to prison for a long, long time. He was arrested for, charged with and pled guilty to more than two-dozen counts related to the sexual molestation and abuse of multiple girls, most of them tween-agers or younger, all of them family friends. As I've tried to get my hands around his actions, their causes and their ramifications, one thing has become very, very clear: the rocks he threw in the pond have made ripples that will spread far and wide for a long, long time. His choices and actions have ruined relationships, families and individual lives. The reality is that while God's mercy can result in incremental healing for those who have been victimized by this man either directly or indirectly, every one of them will spend their entire lives—until the day they die—in a boat that rocks on those ripples. Things were stolen that will never be recovered in this life. He stirred up some very ugly dust that will never fully settle. It's heartbreaking at numerous levels. Nobody wins in this one.

Sadly, I know my head isn't the only one spinning. Every one of us working in youth ministry knows victims and perpetrators of childhood sexual abuse. For those of you who have faced the ugly reality of seeing the dark secret of someone you know exposed by the light, you know how sobering that is. For those of you who think I'm just blowing smoke ... fasten your seat belt. I guarantee that you know perpetrators and victims. At this point, you just don't know it. Someday, your head *will* spin.

Child sexual abuse—defined as an act of assault or exploitation by a person who has authority over or the trust of a child—is at epidemic proportions. Because only 25 percent of cases are ever reported and only one victim in 10 ever will take the initiative on their own to tell, the estimates and statistics are extremely conservative. Some experts are now saying that by the time they reach the age of 16, one out of every three girls and one out of every five boys will have been sexually abused. Think about this statistic next time you look over your youth group kids as they gather together in one room.

And if you're tempted to think that this is the kind of stuff that only happens "out there," think again. *Christianity Today* magazine recently reported that over the course of the last three years, an average of 23 new articles each day have appeared in secular media sources revealing sexual abuse allegations in Protestant churches in the United States. It's no secret that sexual abusers and adults prone to engage in emotional enmeshments with minors will seek out places where kids gather, where trust runs deep and wide, where it's believed that you're safe from people who do bad things, and where there are few protective measures in place. It's a place where it's easy to groom young victims. Hmmm. Sounds like church. It's not surprising that where the church is more theologically conservative and fundamentalist, the more prevalent and unaddressed the abuse. Of course, there are many reasons for this, not the least of which is the fact that people are committed to keeping up appearances while convincing themselves of the false notion that "nobody here would ever do that!" It's a dangerous mix that creates an environment where young victims are somehow convinced that what's happening to them can't be wrong, and if they do finally figure out how wrong it is, they are frightened to speak up.

It is estimated that there are now 60 million survivors of childhood sexual abuse living in America today. Go back and read that last sentence again. Not only do you know victims, chances are that you might be a victim yourself.

If you are a victim of childhood sexual abuse, then what you're about to read is not new news to you simply because you've been there. You most likely knew your abuser. Ninety-three percent of victims know their attacker. Thirty-four percent of the abusers are family members. Fifty-nine percent are family friends. Only 7 percent of the perpetrators are strangers to the victims and their families. You were a child. You trusted older people, especially those you knew. You might not have known you were being abused. And if you did, you may have been among the 80 percent of victims who initially deny they were ever abused or are very hesitant to disclose what happened.

Eventually, the victims of sexual abuse grow up. The sexual abuse that steals their innocence leaves lots of other junk in the hole that was once occupied by the innocence that's been lost. Survivors spend a lifetime struggling with a variety of resultant problems including fear, anxiety, nightmares,

sleeplessness, depression, anger, hostility, inappropriate sexual behavior, an inability to love or be loved, poor self-esteem, a tendency towards substance abuse, and difficulty with close relationships. It's likely they will withdraw from friends and family, have difficulty trusting adults, see their bodies as dirty or damaged, refuse to go to school, become secretive, or engage in delinquent behavior. Some will go so far as to become unusually aggressive, or even become sexual deviants themselves. Sadly, many become suicidal.

If you step back and look at sexual abuse from a spiritual perspective, it's an unmistakable disruption of "shalom." In his book *Not The Way It's Supposed to Be*, Cornelius Plantinga defines "shalom" as "universal flourishing, wholeness and delight." Shalom is what existed in the Garden of Eden before Genesis 3:6. It was the way God intended life to be. Then came the Fall, and God's shalom came undone. Now, we live in a world where there is universal pain and brokenness. Now, we live in a world where God's good sexual shalom has yielded to all kinds of ugly stuff, including the sexual abuse of children. This is, as Plantinga says, not the way it's supposed to be.

Several months ago this was driven home to me when I had a heart-breaking conversation with a high school student I had just met. I'll call him Seth. He had just heard me speak about pornography and the role it was playing in teenagers' lives. Because he was struggling with a pornography addiction, he wanted to talk. Our conversation began with Seth saying, "I want to talk to you about pornography." His story was horrid. When Seth was two years old, his mother secured the services of a speech therapist to help him with his severe speech impediment. The speech therapist would meet with Seth at Seth's house in Seth's room—with the door closed. Seth told me that he remembers being two and the speech therapist helping Seth take off his clothes. Then the speech therapist would take off his own clothes and proceed to sexually molest Seth. This went on for years. Seth never told anyone. An innocent and vulnerable child with no reference point, he believed this type of thing was normal. "I thought this is what all kids did," he told me. Sin perpetrated on this young victim not only caused tremendous pain and confusion, but that sin begat multi-layered sin in Seth's life as he grew older. Seth struggles with homosexuality. He goes online and looks for videos of men kissing each other. He watches and masturbates. This is regular and habitual. "I know it's wrong. I want to stop. When I do it I feel icky," Seth told me. Thirteen years ago, a perpetrator decided to usher an earthquake into Seth's life, and now the landscape of that life is not the way it's supposed to be. A kid—*A KID!*—has been left to pick up the pieces of a broken life that someone else deliberately shattered.

Because sexual abuse runs deep and wide in the world, and the world runs deep and wide in the church, each of us must deliberately understand and address this ugly reality. On the day the man I know was sentenced on multiple counts related to the sexual abuse of children, two questions kept running through my mind. First, outside of the depravity and sin nature common to us all, what prompted him to do what he did? And second, because of the depravity and sin nature common to us all, what will become of those kids who wound up on the receiving end of his twisted behavior? What will they become as adults? While I'm still at a loss to find complete answers to these questions, what I do know is that there is a question all of us who work with and love kids must answer: "What can I do to prevent this type of thing from happening in the lives of the kids I work with, so that they might experience a childhood void of victimization, and a sexually healthy adulthood void of victimizing others?"

Here are some suggestions to get you started:

First, talk about it ... over and over and over again. Make sure everyone in your church—young and old alike—understands the reality and pervasiveness of childhood sexual abuse. Not only does this open the door to recognize that sexual abuse is a very real social and spiritual problem that can't be denied, but it will fuel a "what should we do about it?" mentality that leads to the development of healthy preventative and response measures. In addition, talking about it with your kids creates an environment where they will more readily recognize it as sinful and immoral behavior. Consequently, those who have been victimized will be more prone to come out of the shadows of secrecy and into the light that leads to liberation. And, you will be preparing kids to move into a spiritually healthy adulthood with an established sense of right and wrong that God may indeed use as a deterrent—especially in a world that increasingly sends confusing sexual messages that only feed the mindset of the abuser.

Second, establish protective policies in your church and youth group. Work to implement policies and training that will reduce the risk of making it easy to put kids into the hands of sexual

predators. Screen your volunteers. Require interviews and background checks. Implement oversight and accountability standards.

Third, develop a redemptive plan that can be enacted when childhood sexual abuse is discovered. Don't fall into the trap of believing that you have the knowledge and ability to intervene and do what needs to be done from start to finish. You don't. Highly trained and competent counselors must be employed to work with the victims *and* the perpetrator. Law enforcement officials must be informed immediately. Your role is to respond to the head-spinning realities and get the ball rolling on the long, long process of dealing redemptively *and* responsibly with these very serious matters. Harvest USA, a ministry dealing with the scourge of sexual sin and brokenness (www.harvestusa.org), has established a very helpful list of overall goals for the redemptive process we should enlist when sexual abuse is uncovered. They are:

1. To protect the minor child.
2. To honor the laws of the state.
3. To begin the steps needed to repair the damage.
4. To enable the perpetrator to face the consequences of his or her actions.
5. To maintain the purity of the Church (if the person is a part of the church).
6. To maintain the purity of the witness of Christ in the community.

Fourth, focus on the victim. There's a reason why the folks at Harvest USA put "protect the minor child" at the top of the list. Believe it or not, they are oftentimes forgotten. There are even situations where innocent young victims are somehow blamed. What's wrong with us? The church must go out of its way to affirm young victims who come forward. Not only does this promote the process of healing for the victim, but it fosters a climate where other victims too scared to speak come to see the church as a safe place from which to launch onto the road to restoration. Realize that young sexual abuse victims need you to walk with them every step of the way— and that journey begins the moment they reveal their abuse. Being victimized by sexual abuse is a monumental faith-rattler. How we choose to respond—or not respond—to young victims will shape their concept of God, their relationship to the church and their faith for the rest of their lives.

And finally, always tend to yourself while never letting down your guard. Over the course of the last few months our local papers have not only reported about the man I know, but they've run stories on three separate high school teachers who have been arrested for having sex with minors. Our temptation is to always point the finger and to shake our heads in pious disapproval, all the while denying that we'd ever think or do anything like that. Don't buy the lie. We are sinful and fallen human beings. Each of us is just one bad decision away from life in prison ourselves. Kids look up to those of us in ministry and if we let it, it can feel pretty good. Kids trust us. They are attracted to us. And if we don't watch it, each of us could easily cross the line into anything from inappropriate emotional enmeshment to sexual abuse. Guard the good gift of your sexuality. Surround yourself with accountability. Set boundaries and hold to them. Don't take advantage of vulnerable young people in any way, shape or form. And, if you're struggling, step away and get the help that's needed. Paul wasn't joking when he said, "Flee from sexual immorality" (I Cor. 6:18).

Far too many heads are spinning because of childhood sexual abuse. As ambassadors for the Kingdom, let's do all we can with God's help—and by His grace—to bring the Kingdom to come in relation to sexual abuse on earth, as it is in Heaven. I believe that if we are faithful and obedient, fewer heads will spin, and more and more of our kids can look forward to a life where things will be more like the way they're supposed to be.