

The Difficult but Necessary Subject of Protecting Children in Your Church

by Sam S. Rainer III

The accounts of Gilbert Gauthé are difficult to read. He gravitated to the priesthood in the Roman Catholic Church for one reason: The position offered him unlimited access to young boys. In the 1970s, he preyed on children in several Louisiana towns. Reports would surface about his evil, but the Bishop overseeing the Diocese would move Gauthé to another town before momentum against him built. Gauthé's predatory nature was merely whispered about in local rumors until a stubborn lawyer fought for one of the victims. In 1985, the scandal broke.

The tragedy surrounding Gauthé is horrific. At least 37 boys were victims. Over 11 years, Gauthé committed hundreds of gruesome acts, destroying lives. But Gauthé's story was not an isolated one. His own lawyer, Ray Mouton, would eventually travel the country, compiling a report for the Vatican, warning key officials that a massive scandal of abuse by priests loomed. There were more predators. There were many more victims. His report initially caught the attention of top church leaders, but they eventually disregarded it. Mouton, the lawyer who defended Gauthé, could no longer defend the church.

"I honestly believed the church was a repository of goodness," Mouton [said](#). "As it turns out, it wasn't."

Mouton would eventually fight his own demons. His fixation on evils in the Catholic Church caused him to neglect his own problems. He would lose everything over his alcohol abuse—family, home, and business. Mouton now lives in a small village in Southern France. He writes novels. He no longer attends church.

The Gauthé case darkly foreshadowed what was to come. In the early 2000s, numerous scandals over sexual abuse within the Roman Catholic Church caught global attention. The story was no longer a local one. Global

reports began to surface about child sexual abuse committed by priests and other church leaders. Churches in countries all over the world began to fight against an evil that metastasized from within body.

Unfortunately, this story is broader than just the Catholic Church. The Gauthé case simply exposed light on the dark corners of evil. Examples of abuse exist at churches from all denominations, sizes, and theological backgrounds. Likely, there are cases of abuse in your church. It's one of the toughest lessons I've learned as a pastor. Satan destroys. Personally, I've dealt with predators at every church I've pastored.

The Biblical Requirement for Protecting Children

I don't like writing this article. Frankly, I didn't want to research this topic for our *Deeper Dive* series. Ignoring the issue, however, is exactly what the powers of darkness desire. In 1985, one early report about the Gauthé case [noted](#), "The price of blindness can be high indeed." It's true, but I would add *willful* blindness is sinful. The pastor or church leader that willfully ignores this issue is spiritually guilty of not protecting the flock and can be criminally guilty as well.

Child protection is one of the most important church leadership issues today. And I believe it's a clear biblical issue. According to 1 Timothy 3:2, pastors must be "above reproach." Covering up any form of child abuse violates biblical requirements of church leaders and also disqualifies pastors from leading. Introducing sexual sin to children is demonic. In Matthew 18:5-6, Jesus sternly warns, "Whoever causes the downfall of one of these little ones who believe in Me—it would be better for him if a heavy millstone were hung around his neck and he were drowned in the depths of the sea!" The church *must* protect children.

Only the sickest of church leaders would discount child protection from a biblical perspective. Practically, however, the issue is more difficult. Sin complicates issues and creates confusing situations. I'll offer a real-life case study and then propose some difficult but necessary questions for protecting children at church. The following case study occurred in early 2015. Names have been changed.

A Difficult Case Study

Pastor Joe couldn't believe what he was hearing. The chairman of deacons, Wynn, announced in a worship service to the entire church that Ken would lead worship at their men's conference. Pastor Joe and Wynn had talked at length about Ken's role with the men's conference. What he was hearing now was entirely different.

A few months prior, Wynn had asked Pastor Joe about Ken being involved with the men's conference. Pastor Joe was hesitant. Ken was a convicted sex offender—a former pastor in the community who had preyed on young children. When Wynn originally asked him about Ken, Pastor Joe knew it would get complicated. So Pastor Joe told Wynn that Ken could help behind-the-scenes with the event, but he was not to act in a leadership role. Now Wynn had gone against their agreement. Without Pastor Joe's knowledge, Ken was asked to lead worship at the event.

Making matters more complicated, Ken was the son of one of Pastor Joe's staff, who also happened to be Wynn's best friend. So, Wynn wanted his best friend's son to lead worship at the church's men's conference. Even worse, the men's ministry was encouraging fathers to bring their sons.

As Pastor Joe listened to Wynn give the announcement, he could feel the stares behind him. Everyone in the community knew about Ken. People in the church had specific opinions about Ken. The phone calls began that afternoon.

“What on earth are we doing?! This can't happen!” One irate member yelled.

“Pastor Joe, I'm sorry. I want to support you and the church, but I can't attend this event anymore.” Another member politely expressed disappointment.

After several heated conversations, Deacon Wynn would not back down. He was pushing forward with his plan to have Ken lead worship. The pressure built. The talk about the men's conference morphed into a twisted story about how a church was allowing a sex offender a leadership platform where children would be present. Pastor Joe feared a media maelstrom. People in the church were taking sides.

The Difficult Reality of Child Protection

As the above case study demonstrates, what should be a cut-and-dry issue often becomes complicated because of personalities involved. The sex offender is a staff person's son and former pastor in the community. The chairman of deacons is best friends with this staff person. Some in the church genuinely wanted to show grace to Ken. Many believed Ken was truly repentant. Others in the church believed child protection was more important, regardless of the current condition of Ken's heart.

Child predators don't look like a sinister guy in a dark, grungy trench coat. The difficult reality of child protection is that abuse occurs much closer to home. Abusers are often people others trust. They can even be people in respected positions. What is even more difficult is that the true danger is often with predators who have yet to be discovered. The likelihood of Ken doing something evil at the men's conference was low. Everyone knew and watched him closely. The greater problem for the church stems from those who go undetected.

Difficult Questions about Child Protection in Your Church

Is child abuse really a problem in our culture? Absolutely, the problem is [real](#). About 686,000 children were abused in the United States in 2012, and over 1,600 children died from abuse the same year. Approximately 1 in 4 women and 1 in 6 men have been sexually abused as a child. From a biblical perspective, we live in a hyper-sexual culture in which children are exposed to a repeated and perverse narrative. Pastors and church leaders who ignore this issue are disregarding one of the most dangerous problems affecting children.

Does child abuse actually occur in the church? Yes. Victims of abuse are in your church. Since approximately 25% of women and 17% of men have suffered abuse at some point in their childhood, abuse victims are coming to your church every week. Though specific statistics concerning the number of cases involving sex abuse in the church are hard to obtain, insurance companies handle hundreds of claims a year in which a pastor,

staff person, or volunteer is accused of sexual abuse. The problem is real in the church just as it is in the greater culture.

Where is the greatest danger in most churches? Most churches have specific processes for child safety on-campus and during regular church hours. The greatest danger involves church-sanctioned events and programs that are off-site. In-home Bible studies and groups, in particular, are susceptible to lax controls. In fact, many of the worst cases of child abuse have occurred in home groups. Too often, we hear of home groups in which children are placed in a room with limited or no supervision. If a church threw a bunch of children in a room without supervision during Sunday morning classes, then most parents would be shocked. You should not allow the same to happen with in-home groups. In fact, we suggest having even tighter controls for in-home groups. Predators often gravitate to the most trusting environments with the most lenient supervision. Unfortunately, church home groups can typify this type of environment.

What should we do about suspected abusers? One of the most difficult aspects of this issue involves people whom you suspect have the potential to harm children, but may not have acted out yet. Obviously, you should not wrongly accuse someone. Spreading suspicions without facts is not helpful and can cause much damage. However, neglecting certain signs that raise suspicions is equally as dangerous. As with any sin issue, pastors and church leaders should talk to the individual if suspicions exist. Better to have an awkward conversation and keep children safe than dismiss suspicions and experience a tragedy.

Are we allocating the proper resources for child protection? Proper policies and procedures are necessities for protecting children. However, you must also allocate enough resources to implement these policies and procedures. If your church must choose between adult curriculum and background checks, then the children are the priority. If your church is deciding between safer areas for children and a new choir room, then the children are the priority. Child protection is too important an issue. It should be among the top ministry priorities for churches.

What if something happens at my church? Most churches will experience some form of an attack against children. Be prepared with *specific* policies and procedures. Also, make sure all staff and every volunteer understands the processes for reporting abuse. Report every reasonable suspicion of

abuse or neglect to the proper authorities. The scandal occurs in how you handle the situation. Cover-ups cause just as much harm as the offense.

Any organization with lots of children is a target for predators. Satan especially wants to attack churches. John 10:10 warns that spiritual thieves steal, kill, and destroy. Predators steal the innocence of children. Predators kill the mission of the church. Predators destroy lives of families. The issue of child protection is difficult. The problem is real. Pastors and church leaders *must* protect children.