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## **Faith In Prevention**

*A commentary on the recent reports of church-related incidents of child sexual abuse  
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Stop It Now! is often asked about how we respond to the issue of child sexual abuse in the church. Our response is the same as how we respond to sexual abuse in any institution, in any community, and in any home – whether the abusive person is a priest, a doctor, a trusted friend or even a parent. We begin the discussion with prevention. How could these cases of sexual abuse have been prevented in the first place? What do we need to do so that no more children are harmed? We know that by not holding the abusive individuals (and institutions) accountable, the door has been left open for the same individuals to continue to abuse children, sometimes over many years.

Beyond the focus on any one person, prevention requires looking at the environments and organizations in which the abuse was perpetrated. Why did it happen so often? How did it happen for so long? It is critical to understand the conditions, values and norms that allowed so many to behave in problematic and criminal ways. Rather than only focusing on improved responses to reporting AFTER abuse has been perpetrated, it is key to identify opportunities to intervene early - BEFORE perpetration occurs.

Training and education needs to identify how to speak up and effectively intervene when there are boundary violations or when there are signs that an adult is at-risk to abuse a child. To do this, we need to understand the norms, values and practices that get in the way of people taking effective action when there are signs – or even when there are direct disclosures of sexual abuse.

What can be done about sexual abuse in the church and in any community or environment? Fundamentally, through a prevention lens, adults must learn all we can about sexual abuse so more of us feel confident and prepared to reach out and address early warning signs of harmful or problematic sexual behaviors – whether in children, youth or adults. Prevention means speaking up as soon as we see concerning behaviors and setting safe boundaries around children no matter who the person is or what position of trust, power or authority they hold.

A huge barrier to recognizing and responding to problematic or harmful sexual behaviors in individuals is holding these individuals in such high regard that we cannot believe they can be so good at what they do, and yet ALSO be someone who could or who is abusing a child. We cannot see these individuals as someone who could commit a sexual offense, as someone many would describe as a “monster” - the fall out is too immense. We would have to question the care we receive, the relationships we have with the institution itself and our overall belief in the system. We would have to ask these people to take responsibility for the harm they’ve caused; to immediately stop it, and get any and all help needed to change. We would have to ask those responsible for harming children to be accountable and support those harmed. But if we cannot see

them as people capable of doing something harmful, we can't see them as people we have to challenge in order to keep children safe or as people who need to accept responsibility. So we remain quiet – we don't speak up.

Another barrier derives from the blindness that comes when we unconditionally trust the safety of an institution. When we are faced with situations that cause our deep belief and faith in an institution's practices, service and intentions to be questioned, we are challenged to then question our own beliefs and values. For many, this is intolerable, and yet this complicated reluctance to see the institutions that we turn to for support and direction as complicit in the abuse of children prioritizes that institution's reputation and power, instead of prioritizing doing all that can be done to help those who have been harmed and to stop any further perpetration.

The complexity of these power dynamics and the motivations to believe that powerful people and institutions never commit the crime of sexual abuse will indeed take a long time to unravel and address. It is very challenging to hold the reality that an individual or organization can do a great deal of good while also causing a great deal of harm. But we are not without preventive action steps that can be instituted in every institution.

We can give individuals tools to build their knowledge about sexual abuse, about warning signs and how to respond to them and how to plan for safety with their own families and children. We can mandate training for adults in professional roles who come into contact with children on how to respond to their concerns and observations about risks to children's safety. We can build parent's and professional's competence and confidence levels so that they are prepared to speak up when they have concerns and know who they can go to for support and help.

We can also implement institutional policies and practices to strengthen safety and provide clear instructions regarding behaviors and situations that cross boundaries. We can conduct background checks and also practice screening of all adults who come into contact with children. Clear policies on what is to be reported, how to make a report and who is responsible can strengthen an institution's prevention steps.

We need to be willing to talk about children's sexual safety. Sexual abuse thrives in secrecy. Building a culture of true safety and respect means no more secrets. The secrets do not help those who need help to stop their harmful behavior and further harms those victimized, and profoundly weaken any youth serving organization.

We need to talk about not only sexual abuse, but also about healthy relationships and sexuality. Adults need to practice and model safe and healthy relationships, and be willing to be involved in children's healthy sexuality development.

And finally, we have to offer a hopeful response to adults who recognize their attractions to children and who are committed to never acting on it by abusing a child. Many who sexually abuse are not pedophiles – they are not primarily or solely sexually attracted to children – but rather they are taking advantage of the vulnerability of children they have access to. For those seeking help, help must be made available.

Apologies can be healing, but they're often not enough without opening the door to preventing the reoccurrence. There must be the genuine interest and attempt in understanding what happened and what will prevent it from ever happening again. We can do that – but we have to be willing to ask the difficult questions and then act to create the safest conditions possible so that no child has to experience sexual abuse.

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