

Friday Life

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Talking about abuse can help stop it

Churches must take steps to protect children

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We don't want to talk about child sexual abuse. We don't even want to think about it.

And when we do, we're sure it happens in someone else's congregation, not ours, because we know those we worship with.

"Do you?" asks Chris Newlin, executive director of the National Children's Advocacy Cen-

ter, located in Huntsville.

"Every day down here," Newlin said recently as he pointed toward the Team Building where therapists interview children and non-offending adults, "I can tell you, someone comes in saying, 'I can't believe that person would do it.' We all would like to think that we know people."

Congregations too large to have the assumption of acquaintance are most likely to have the security policies in place that Newlin recommends: background checks, no less than two adults in a Sunday



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school room, no unsupervised teenagers with children, basic training for supervising adults on spotting signs of abuse.

These days, no one is sur-

prised to be asked for the information necessary to check backgrounds, says Liz Hewlitt, pastor of early child ministries at The Rock Family Worship

Center, which has more than 2,000 members. Hewlitt said they screen for all past brushes with the law, and sometimes find information useful in ways other than dealing with children's supervision.

"We screen every volunteer," Hewlitt said last week, adding with a laugh: "We even know who our speeders are - and they don't drive the bus."

Adults willing to help with Sunday school classes and other youth activities at The Rock are trained on teaching, church

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safety, emergency procedures — and preventing child abuse. No class at the church ever has fewer than two adults in the room, and if those adults are married to each other, they count as just one person, Hewlitt said.

The background checks The Rock runs include a search of national databases, because abusers move to avoid detection. And abusers know that a religious congregation provides rich hunting grounds full of trusting children and unending need for adult volunteers.

"These people appear to be great, but they can have nefarious intentions," Newlin said.

And abusers thrive on silence and flourish in the shadows of willful ignorance.

"One of the best things a church can do is just talk about it," Newlin said. "If you want to make an offender nervous, talk about it. Sex abuse is something that thrives in darkness."

While, according to surveys of adults, girls are nearly twice as likely to be sexually abused as are boys, discovering and preventing abuse of boys by homosexual abusers is often the more difficult task. There is even more shame involved, Newlin said, on the part of the victim, since the crime involves not only forced sexual activity, but also sexual identity confusion. And most churches layer an extra level of taboo for homosexual activity than heterosexual activity.

Donnie McClurkin, the preacher and Grammy-nominated musician, writes about the pain caused by his own abuse at the hands of an uncle and a male cousin in his book "Eternal Victim/Eternal Victor."

McClurkin turned to the church for comfort, but discovered, "there were brothers who seemingly befriended me under the guise of mentorship, only to reveal their desire and purpose

Facts about Madison County

- Children (younger than 18): 82,460
- Foster children: 546
- Adoptions: 34 a year.
- Child abuse or neglect allegations: average 1,400 a year.
- Abused children served by National Child Advocacy Center in 2007: 362.
- Neglect: 50 percent of abuse cases.
- Physical abuse: 35 percent of abuse cases.
- Sexual abuse: 15 percent of abuse cases.
- Sexual abuse by adolescents of younger children: 35 percent of sex abuse cases.
- Nationwide, studies among adults show that 25 percent of girls and 14 percent of boys will be sexually abused before 18.

Source: Department of Human Resources, National Child Advocacy Center.

to further the perversion and increase the confusion."

Open discussion of the issue would have helped him, McClurkin writes.

"I wonder how it would have been if there was someone, anyone, that I could have confided in at a young age, and been mentored and helped before this seed took root," he writes. "I wish the church was that open and ready to deal with this issue."

A crime, not just a sin

But too many children find only denial when they do report a problem, says Barbara Anderson who, with her husband, Joe, helped bring national attention to a pattern of abuse denial in the Jehovah's Witnesses a few years ago.

The Witnesses have a policy, based on biblical principals, that if one member has a problem with another, they are to go first to that person and then to the elders to resolve. In cases where wrongdoing is alleged, the elders ask for at least two witnesses, the complainant and another.

Where elders went wrong, Anderson said, speaking re-

cently as she and her husband traveled through Fayetteville, Tenn., on the way from their home in Tullahoma to visit friends in Atlanta, was confusing crime with sin.

"This is a matter for the police, not the elders," Anderson said. "But they didn't want to make the church look bad."

Anderson became aware of the extent of the problem because she worked as a researcher in the publishing offices of the Witnesses in Brooklyn. She passed on documents such as letters from victims and official church memos to lawyers helping victims sue the church.

Anderson and her husband have since been excommunicated from the church. She documents her findings at watchtowerdocuments.com.

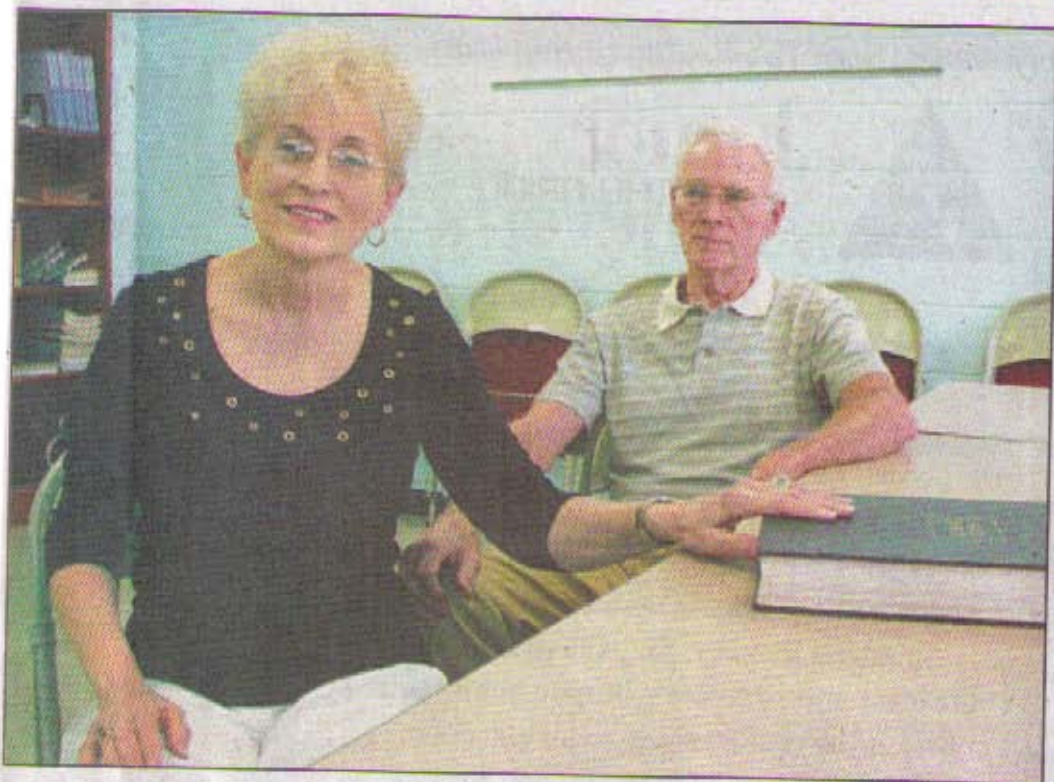
In both the Witnesses scandal and in the better-known Catholic scandal, abusers who confessed and repented were usually accepted back into the church and the allegations kept secret. Some of the Witness elders thought such confessions were protected under clergy privilege, an argument they made unsuccessfully in court in a case that was settled out of court in 2007.

Rick McLean, who remains on America's Most Wanted list for child abuse for multiple offenses over 20 years against young girls in California, is the most notorious of those accused of abuse by Witnesses and whose crimes had been made known to church elders.

Since the Jehovah's Witness cases broke into the news and courtrooms in 2002, Witness church leaders have issued statements to instruct elders that suspected child abuse is to be reported in states, including Tennessee and Alabama, where laws mandate the report of suspected abuse. The church's Web site, watchtower.org, includes articles to help families and congregations prevent child abuse.

Finding resurrection

Web sites for victims, silentlamb.org for Witnesses, and Survivors Network of those



Kay Campbell/Huntsville Times

Barbara and Joe Anderson were disfellowshipped from Jehovah's Witnesses after they helped bring to light child abuse problems that church elders had not turned over to authorities.

Making church safe

Preventing and healing child abuse:

- Presentations, information, classes: National Child Advocacy Center, Chris Newlin director, cnewlin@nationalcac.org, 327-3785.

- Accufax, www.accufax-us.com, 800-256-8898. One of several online resources for background checks, one used by some local congregations.

- Spiritual direction for those recovering from abuse: Mari Zimmerman at the Huntsville Association for Pastoral Care, mariz@hi-way.net.

- "Take and make Holy: Honoring the Sacred in the Healing Journey of Abuse Survivors," by Mari West Zimmerman. \$12. A resource for worship leaders seeking to create new services to meet the spiritual needs of the abused.

- "Reducing the Risk of Child Sexual Abuse in Your Church" by Hammer, Klipowicz, Cobble. Published by Christian Ministry Resources.

Helping others:

- Support social workers and foster families through the Madison County office of the Alabama Department of Human Services. Information: Donn.Hamlett@dhr.alabama.gov, 535-4508.

- Donate art materials, do yard work, support social workers at the National Child Advocacy Center, 210 Pratt Ave. N.E. Information: cnewlin@nationalcac.org, 327-3785.

Abused by Priests, snapnetwork.org, for Catholics, offer tales of past court cases and resources for victims.

For most victims, abuse that happens in a religious context destroys, or at least debilitates, the victim's faith, says Mari West

Zimmerman, a spiritual director who sometimes works with abuse victims seeking to find a way back to God.

"They often need to work on their image of God," Zimmerman said last week, speaking from her office at the Huntsville

Association for Pastoral Care. "They feel abandonment, or that God's out to get them. They can't sort out what's 'church' and what's God."

Zimmerman, a survivor of sexual abuse herself, has written "Take and Make Holy," a guide for religious ceremonies to help abuse victims move from the feelings of contamination, desecration and self-hatred to a place of restoration and wholeness.

"Nothing can make what happened good - it's total evil," Zimmerman said. "But out of that, one response, working with God, is to bring something good out of that experience, so that it is not totally wasted. To find a way to celebrate the ongoing process of redemption so that evil does not have the last word. To affirm that there is resurrection."

"Many people, if they really recover, come out of the experience with a degree of understanding and compassion for people who are in pain and suffering," Zimmerman said.