

More Church Leaders Exposed for Child Sex Abuse; Here's How American Church Must Respond

Last month, a judge denied bail to Joaquín García, a megachurch leader accused of rape and other sexual acts against children. The month before, Anthony Haynes, once the leader of Greater Life Christian Center in Toledo, was sentenced to life in prison for trafficking a 14-year-old girl he had taken into his home after her mother became unable to care for her.

To many Americans, the revelation of the abuse committed by Haynes and García, though disturbing, might feel like just another example of a problem too pervasive to solve. From the Pennsylvania grand jury report about abuse in the Catholic church (last August), to the *Houston Chronicle's* report of the abuse of over 700 victims in the Southern Baptist Convention, stories of sex abuse committed by church leaders have been far too common for comfort. But we can't allow ourselves to become immune to them.

The trouble is that these abuses overshadow the good work thousands of churches and church leaders are doing across the country every day. Every time a priest, pastor or minister betrays the trust of a child, it jeopardizes the trust we have in leaders who are truly upstanding, moral members of our faith communities.

This is why we cannot look away from these stories. It is why we need to advocate for our churches to embrace their role in *preventing* trafficking, by providing resources to those struggling with sex addiction and aggression *before* they act

out and engage in abuse or trafficking.

The truth is this is not only a pastor problem; these are struggles faced by many men from a young age, and the problem is only growing with the increasing access and exposure to sexual content via digital platforms. But what would have happened if Haynes, or García, or the hundreds of Catholic clergy or the 380 Southern Baptist church leaders facing allegations of sexual misconduct had been proactively engaged by their own church or seminary mentors when as young men they were “called” to enter the ministry? If they had been able to openly attack their struggles without shame, could they have been set on a different path? How many victims would have been spared?

No one wakes up one day and decides to purchase sex or abuse someone. These actions are the culmination of years of misguided thoughts, attitudes and unaccountable behaviors, and perhaps even a history of the abuser being abused himself. Pornography use, for example—particularly the use of violent, hard-core pornography—has been found to be associated with rape and rape proclivity. And those who have experienced abuse are more likely to go on to abuse than those who have never experienced abuse.

This is where we as the church can and must intervene. Those who struggle with pornography, those who grapple with having been abused, those who possess what’s known as “hostile masculinity”—a combination of anger, combativeness and distrust toward women that is predictive of sexual aggression—should not feel shamed into silence. The church can, and should, talk about these issues in an open, honest way—with teens, with adults and with young people in seminaries *before* they commit a crime they cannot undo. While these are painful issues to address, doing so can potentially spare another generation from experiencing the cycle of abuse and exploitation.

In short, it's vital that we take a proactive, rather than simply a reactive, approach to these issues. The Southern Baptist Convention's vows to reform its churches is a great start, but it cannot be the end of the story. All churches and faith communities have a vital role to play in ending the demand for sex trafficking—and it has to start with a culture of openness about the problem facing our congregations across the country. {eoa}

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