

Repenting for sexual abuse isn't a distraction from the church's work

It *is* the church's work.

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Charges of sexual misconduct this summer toppled the ministries of two towering church leaders in two very different segments of Christianity. Bill Hybels, founder and longtime pastor of Willow Creek Community Church in Illinois, is a legendary figure in the world of the evangelical megachurch. Cardinal Theodore McCarrick, former archbishop of Washington, D.C., has been an eminence in the Roman Catholic Church. Neither the loose, entrepreneurial structure of Willow Creek nor the sharply defined hierarchy of the Catholic Church was able to protect people, hold leaders accountable, or respect survivors' stories. (The extent of the Catholic Church's failures was further evident in a Pennsylvania grand jury's report released in August.)

In these cases, as in many comparable but less publicized ones in all corners of mainline Protestantism, Christians have failed to defend the innocent, listen to the vulnerable, and confront the offender. Boz Tchividjian, a veteran investigator of

sexual misconduct in faith communities, draws this sobering conclusion: churches are as likely as any other institution to be “seduced by power and influence.” When sexual harassment or abuse occurs, the church is inclined to support those who are powerful and influential, which usually means the perpetrators, not the victims.

Though no single change in policy or structure can transform this pattern, a culture that tolerates abuse and harassment can be steadily reformed. Congregational leaders can educate themselves about the nature of harassment and the trauma of abuse. Congregants and staff can insist that their churches be responsive to complaints and protective of whistle-blowers. Being aware of the pressures on insiders to protect the institution and its leaders, congregational leaders can make strategic use of independent consultants and expert counselors to bring clarity and transparency to volatile situations. Independent groups like GRACE (“Godly Response to Abuse in the Christian Environment”) or FaithTrust Institute, which have extensive knowledge of the congregational setting, can provide crucial training.

The deeper challenge here for the church is to gain a firmer grasp of its fundamental theological convictions. More than any other institution, churches should understand the pervasiveness of sin and the corrupting effects of power. The fact that humans are inclined to misuse God’s gifts, perhaps especially the gifts of sexuality and power, is woven into the Christian story of fall and redemption. It shouldn’t come as a surprise. When the church ignores or downplays its own brokenness in these areas so as to preserve its reputation, it denies the heart of its own message, as if it doesn’t really believe in the power of the gospel to expose sin and lead to repentance and a deeper communion with God.

It’s a tragic irony that church leaders so often act as though sexual misconduct needs to be covered up so that the work of the church can go on. Confronting sin so that all can live in truth and hope isn’t an impediment to the church’s work; it is the work of the church.

A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title “Confronting sexual abuse.”