

DR. LISA COMPTON *and*
TAYLOR PATTERSON

SKILLS
for
SAFEGUARDING

A GUIDE *to* PREVENTING
ABUSE *and* FOSTERING
HEALING *in the* CHURCH



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INTRODUCTION

DR. LISA COMPTON AND
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EVERY BELIEVER IS CALLED to use their voice to advocate for those in need (Proverbs 31:8-9), seek justice on behalf of others (Isaiah 1:17), and demonstrate their religion by acting on behalf of vulnerable groups (James 1:27). In short, every believer is called to safeguard. The care we provide to the most vulnerable and powerless among us is counted as service to the Lord (Matthew 25:40; Mark 9:37). This protective service is rewarded by God: “Blessed are those who have regard for the weak; the LORD delivers them in times of trouble” (Psalm 41:1). On the other hand, there is severe punishment for those who harm children and other vulnerable members of society: “It is impossible that no offenses should come, but woe to him through whom they do come! It would be better for him if a millstone were hung around his neck, and he were thrown into the sea, than that he should offend one of these little ones” (Luke 17:1-2 NKJV). Those of us with power and influence are called by God to sacrificially serve and protect those who are more vulnerable. As we will learn in subsequent chapters, every human being is made in the image of God; therefore, we all have some measure of power and agency that we are responsible for stewarding faithfully. Adults in the church have a clear obligation to honor the vulnerability of children and are commissioned by God to use their influence to act on their behalf.

Safeguarders can be individuals hired by the church in a vocational safeguarding role, but they can also be pastors/priests/clergy and other church leaders, laity, mental health professionals, and anyone who desires to promote a safe environment, prevent abuse, and facilitate healing from abuse and



trauma. Ideally, every adult in the church acknowledges their responsibility to safeguard and seeks to grow in safeguarding skills to better serve abuse survivors and cultivate a culture of safety for the vulnerable. Examples of abusive situations that safeguarders may encounter include:

- a person who was abused by a stranger, acquaintance, or friend
- a person who was abused by a family member outside of the church
- a person who was abused by a family member inside the church
- a person who was abused by a leader in the church

All of these cases provide an opportunity for the church, the body of Christ, to actively participate and fulfill our divine mandate to serve in this protective role.

WHAT IS SAFEGUARDING?

According to Dr. Angela Rinaldi, a lecturer at Pontifical Gregorian University in Rome, safeguarders are people who recognize their responsibilities and roles in setting up safe environments. This means that safeguarders are people able to prevent abuses and act when abuse happens. Safeguarding actions include:

- **Look**
 - identify signs and indicators of abuse
 - recognize possible risk and protective factors of abuse
- **Listen**
 - listen to victims' stories in an empathetic, nonjudgmental, supportive manner
 - provide safe places for individuals and families to share their stories
- **Equip**
 - share tools that promote healing with survivors and their families
 - teach others to build healthy relationships
 - connect primary and secondary victims to appropriate resources
- **Speak Out**
 - speak publicly against abuse
 - report abuse to law enforcement based on local laws
 - advocate to those in authority positions to promote safety

Safeguarders look, listen, equip, and speak out in various capacities as they work with individuals, families, churches, communities, and organizational systems. In order to function properly, all members of the church must devote themselves to the work of safeguarding within the confines of their roles and expertise in partnership with other members of the body (1 Corinthians 12:21-31). Mental health professionals are skilled in addressing the mental health needs of trauma survivors, including addiction recovery, suicidality, severe emotional dysregulation, self-harm, and dissociation. Church leadership provides compassionate care that emphasizes spiritual development and care for the trauma survivor. Lay people can use their vocational expertise to provide for survivors' practical needs and can provide a safe, supportive community in which survivors experience healthy and reparative relationships. No one person or profession can alone accomplish the work of safeguarding. It is necessary that all parts of the body of Christ work collaboratively with one another to create church communities that prevent abuse and foster healing for trauma survivors. This text will train you in the knowledge and skills needed to perform these functions and form multidisciplinary partnerships.

VALUED ROLE

You are the most valuable asset of the church. You are the hands, feet, and mouthpiece of Jesus on this earth against the evil principalities and powers that plot to bring harm and destruction. That statement may sound grandiose but will be validated as you read the chapters outlining the unconscionable reality of abuse, particularly against children. As is often quoted, "The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men to do nothing." For too long, abuse in the church has been concealed not only by perpetrators but also by others who choose to look the other way or even enable the harmful behaviors to continue. Based on Matthew 25:45-46, what we fail to do for the powerless, we fail to do for the Lord. However, when godly women and men take action against abuse and its destruction, evil will no longer flourish.

This is the opportune time to become involved in safeguarding. Modern society has over-sexualized children, and child pornography and human trafficking are at epic proportions (Woldehanna et al., 2023). There are even marginal secular groups that seek to normalize pedophilia as an alternative sexual preference that they claim people should be free to act on. The church should be a pillar of sexual morality and a safe refuge for all people, but too often, it has been

a place where people have used their power and spiritual authority to exploit others. We have repeatedly seen the pervasive evil of sexual abuse in the church and subsequent coverups publicly exposed by courageous survivors and diligent investigative journalists. It is time for the church to take its rightful place on the front lines against all forms of abuse—both in the community and within its own walls. We need to be so appalled by evil that we use our voices, our energy, and all our resources to expose what is hidden in darkness, stand with those who have been harmed, and bring those who perpetrate harm to justice.

TRIGGER WARNING

This work is worth doing, and it will cost you. It will require you to turn toward the reality of trauma rather than looking away. You will be challenged to courageously advocate for the voiceless, sometimes even at personal cost. As you engage in this work and seek to do good, you will clearly see the evil in the world. It will change you. You will feel overwhelmed by the harsh reality that trauma is a global pandemic and that abuse is prevalent across gender, race, ethnicity, socioeconomic levels, nations, religions, and church denominations. The fact that so many precious, innocent children have been violated in youth programs, vacation Bible schools, summer camps, church settings, and Christian homes by those who claim to serve in the name of Jesus will incite disgust and rage. Use your rage to fuel your mission, and use your anger to advocate for those without a voice. We must work to strengthen our ability to “not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good” (Romans 12:21).

This text is not only a guide on how to help others but also a source of vital information to help you care for yourself while doing this divine work. In order to experience longevity in your ministry and personal wellness, you will need tools to reduce psychological and emotional harm from secondary trauma exposure. Proverbs 4:23 warns us to guard our hearts. As you work through this text, be aware of your own reactions to this challenging topic and take breaks as needed. This will help you meaningfully engage with and retain the information presented in this text and prepare you to regulate your own emotions as you sit before real survivors telling their stories of horrific abuse. We recommend you be intentional about how you read this text. For example, it is likely not wise to read portions of this text right before you go to bed. Some readers may prefer to read this text while in the library or coffee shop rather than in their homes because being in public helps them to stay grounded. Others may prefer to read in



the comfort of their homes as it provides a quiet, peaceful place to digest the information. Regardless of your preference, be mindful of its impact. It may also help to take walks outside as nature can be very grounding or stretch your body to reduce muscle tension. You may want to skip ahead to the chapter on emotion regulation strategies to develop those skills first.

OVERVIEW

The chapters are structured so that this book can be used as a textbook in an academic setting or as a general knowledge text for anyone who realizes their safeguarding responsibility and wants to grow in the necessary skills. Safeguarding in the church is a complex topic that requires expertise in multiple areas, including power dynamics, trauma responses, perpetrator characteristics, vulnerable populations, and foundational helping skills. In order to provide depth to the text, we recruited authors with unique expertise in their chapter topics. However, we wanted this book to read as one cohesive text, rather than a collection of essays with different writing styles and voices. To accomplish this, we edited each chapter to match one consistent voice and structured the material so that the topics build on one another. Although no stories represent actual clients, we have included many illustrations of abuse that come from our work with trauma survivors. Each chapter includes:

- content expert section on the chapter topic
- questions for self-reflection
- questions for group discussion

We also want to provide a brief note about terms. There is no one label that accurately reflects both the destructive nature of trauma and the incredible resilience of those who have been abused. For example, the term *victim* rightly recognizes the significant harm that is done by abuse and places the responsibility for that harm on the perpetrator. However, people who have experienced abuse often do not want to maintain *victim* as a long-term identity marker. On the other hand, the term *survivor* is grounded in a strengths-based perspective and highlights the resilience of those who have been abused. We also recognize that some who have experienced trauma do not wish to be called *survivor* because they feel this term overemphasizes the trauma as part of their identity and life experience. We seek to honor the dignity of all people and have taken care throughout the text to choose terms carefully based on the context of each sentence. The term *victim* will be used

to reference those who have been abused when discussing perpetrator dynamics and the immediate aftermath of abuse. *Survivor* will be used when engaging with the strategies people implement to manage the long-term effects of abuse and their efforts to heal from traumatic experiences. We chose to use the term *perpetrator* throughout to represent those who enact the abuse.

CONCLUSION

Trauma work is a heroic adventure—a battle against destructive forces and an incredible effort to pursue healing. At the heart of the evil of abuse in the church, particularly child sexual abuse, is the profound abuse of power and a system that enables this harm through the conspiracy of cover-up (Doyle, 2006). This book provides thorough training to equip an army of protectors and trauma responders. This text will prepare you for safeguarding work as well as provide you with skills to reduce your own risk of compassion fatigue, both necessary components of spiritual formation for every person who serves in any ministry capacity.

Safeguarding will be a multigenerational mission of change. It requires an army of laborers committed to advocating for the vulnerable for the rest of their lives to reverse a culture of complicity that suppresses the truth to preserve power and protect an institution. Equipping the saints with tools to prevent abuse and care for survivors will take time. However, significant systemic change for the church is possible. Training in safeguarding skills is a crucial step in this journey. When reflecting on the presence of evil and the justice of God, the psalmist writes, “The wicked plots against the righteous, and gnashes his teeth at him; but the LORD laughs at the wicked, for he sees that his day is coming” (Psalm 37:12-13 RSV). We can be confident that ultimate victory is with the Lord. We will win the war against abuse through our obedience to the Lord’s calling to serve and by the guidance and power of his Holy Spirit.

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SECTION I

**REALITY
OF ABUSE**



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FOUNDATIONAL KNOWLEDGE OF SAFEGUARDING AND ABUSE

TAYLOR PATTERSON

A WOMAN CRIES AS SHE CONFIDES in a friend about ongoing domestic violence in her home and is rebuked for not submitting to her husband's leadership. A young boy whispers reluctant agreement when he is told by his youth pastor that he surely misunderstood his teacher's actions because only girls are sexually abused. A family is excommunicated from a church for expressing discomfort with the authoritarian leadership style. A young pastor feels unappreciated and overworked but finds comfort in sexual fantasies about a grieving congregant to whom he is ministering; he insists she needs frequent prayer meetings and pastoral counseling sessions to spend more time together. A teenage girl bravely reports abuse perpetrated by a church deacon but hides in shame when her Sunday school teacher responds with encouragement to dress more modestly. The church has too often abandoned its charge to reflect the character of God, promote truth, and pursue righteousness. Instead, we have directed our efforts toward cover-up and self-preservation.

In her discussion of David and Bathsheba, Jacqueline Grey (2019) writes, "When leaders and institutions prioritize their reputation over truth it results in the perpetuation of one transgression after another" (p. 22). The abusive act itself is one transgression; the culture that enabled the abuse to fester is another; the complicity, or turning away, of others after indications of abuse are revealed is another; and the ensuing institutional efforts to cover up abuse is another. The work of safeguarding requires us all to commit ourselves to the mission of the church by repenting of the ways we have turned away from the

suffering of the vulnerable and courageously advocating for truth and righteousness in our communities.

SAFEGUARDING THROUGHOUT SCRIPTURE

Though it is a more recent term, safeguarding is not a new work. Throughout human history, men and women have used their power in a way that harms others and serves themselves, and people have turned away from injustice to preserve their comfort. In response, God has raised up advocates who execute justice, defend the vulnerable, and call others to repentance. Consider the following biblical accounts of leaders and institutions being held accountable by God's chosen safeguarding advocates.

King David, lauded as a “man after [God’s] own heart” (1 Samuel 13:14; Acts 13:22),¹ was anointed by God to rule over Israel, and from his lineage Jesus the Messiah was born (Matthew 1). However, David used this power and influence to meet his own needs when he commanded his messengers to take Bathsheba from her home to have sex with him (2 Samuel 11:4). David’s transgressions multiplied when he responded to Bathsheba’s pregnancy by using his military authority to orchestrate the death of her husband and cover his sin (2 Samuel 11). These cascading abuses of power angered God. In response, God charged Nathan with the task of safeguarding and commanded him to boldly confront the King of Israel. This could have resulted in a great personal cost to Nathan, as David had already facilitated a murder to cover his sins, but Nathan was committed to justice and obedient to God’s commands. Nathan rebuked David and warned him of the coming judgment. This judgment was not done in secret; instead, God tells David, “You did it secretly, but I will do this thing before all Israel and before the sun” (2 Samuel 12:12). Grey (2019) writes that it “is not defending God’s repute by covering unethical behavior; in fact, we are undermining the justice of God” (p. 25). Nathan is a model for us as we seek to grow in courage for the work of safeguarding to hold our leaders accountable to God’s standard of humility and service.

God’s commitment to justice and care for the vulnerable is not limited to individual leaders but extends to nations and institutions that are commanded to represent his character. The Old Testament prophets were raised up by God to call the nation of Israel to repentance for forsaking God and his commands.

¹Scripture quotations in this chapter are from the ESV unless otherwise indicated.

Isaiah 1 describes God's displeasure with Israel's half-hearted worship, as evidenced by their lack of attention and care for the vulnerable. Isaiah 1:16-17 charges Israel to "wash yourselves; make yourselves clean; remove the evil of your deeds from before my eyes; cease to do evil, learn to do good; seek justice, correct oppression; bring justice to the fatherless, plead the widow's cause." Israel's rebellion incurred the wrath of God. However, God was also committed to rebuilding his people into an institution that reflected its original design. The prophet Isaiah writes, "Afterward you shall be called the city of righteousness, the faithful city" (Isaiah 1:26). God is not afraid to dismantle and rebuild his established institutions for his glory. When we see patterns of abuse in the church, we are called to be like the prophets, calling leaders to repentance and working for the good of the community and the glory of God.

These accounts emphasize that no leader is too powerful and no institution is too large to be rebuked when the vulnerable are being harmed. The church must take God's glory too seriously to sit idly by while cultures of abuse fester within the household of God. Psalm 72:14 describes God's safeguarding character: "From oppression and violence he redeems their life, and precious is their blood in his sight." God has called us to join in this work and be agents of that redemption. We must not turn away. Instead, we must (1) lean in by learning about the impact of trauma, developing skills for engaging with survivors, and courageously advocating for safe communities; and (2) look within by facing our own susceptibility to use power for selfish gain, soothing our discomfort as we bear witness to suffering, and healing from wounds that prompt us to employ unhealthy strategies for meeting our own needs.

LEAN IN: UNDERSTANDING ABUSE

To effectively *lean in* to the work of safeguarding our communities, we must have a proper understanding of abuse that unveils quietly lurking evil. Unfortunately, most abuse is committed by a person in a position of trust—a parent, family member, teacher, coach, or religious leader. These instances of abuse and subsequent cover-up exist in all types of institutions—parachurch ministries, Catholic churches, Protestant churches, and nondenominational churches. No institution or denominational affiliation is immune to the potential abuse of power. The public exposure of widespread instances of child sexual abuse in the Catholic church perpetrated by priests was an *enormous*

step in the direction of holding our religious institutions accountable and helping our communities be safer. However, there is a danger that we might see these instances of grievous abuse and praise God we do not “sin like they do,” while ignoring the wickedness in our own hearts and institutions. Learning about complicity and the different types of abuse helps us attune to the potential evil in our midst.

Disclaimer: The following discussion includes both abuse that is criminal in many jurisdictions and abuse that is not legally reportable but still extraordinarily harmful. In instances of criminal abuse (such as child abuse), we *must* follow all reporting laws. The church does not replace legal institutions, and they could put others in harm if criminal abuse is not reported. While not every type or instance of abuse in this discussion is a criminal offense, they are *all* grievous sins against God and those made in his image; therefore, they must be confronted by the church. Jurisdictions may vary in their determination of legally reportable abuse, but God’s law is consistent in what is evil in his sight.

Complicity. When conceptualizing abuse in the church, we must first face our own complicity. We are complicit when we create environments that make abuse possible or turn away from indications that abuse is happening. For example, if a school custodian walks by a classroom, sees a teacher kissing a young boy through the classroom window, and chooses not to speak up, he is complicit in her actions. Scripture clearly states our responsibility to do good and not turn away from injustice. James 4:17 says, “So whoever knows the right thing to do and fails to do it, for him it is sin.” There are varying degrees of complicity, ranging from failure to confront questionable policies that have yet to result in an act of abuse to knowingly facilitating a perpetrator’s access to a child. It is common for trauma survivors to feel most betrayed by those who could have stopped the abuse but chose not to.

Gregory Mellema (2008) elaborates on the concept of complicity by summarizing Thomas Aquinas’s discussion of how people can enable wrongdoing and the ensuing moral responsibility. These include nine areas of complicity:

1. by command—someone in a position of authority commands another to commit wrongdoing
2. by counsel—advising another to commit wrongdoing
3. by consent—condoning or giving permission to another to commit wrongdoing

4. by flattery—commending the consideration or the carrying out of wrongdoing
5. by receiving—covering up knowledge of wrongdoing or protecting the person who committed it
6. by participation—joining in wrongdoing
7. by silence—discovering wrongdoing and saying nothing
8. by not preventing—not taking reasonable steps to guard against wrongdoing when one has the ability and responsibility to do so
9. by not denouncing—acknowledging that the wrongdoing took place but not condemning it as morally unacceptable

Safeguarding would also add to Aquinas’s model not helping the victim(s) pursue healing as an area of complicity. Abusive religious systems often utilize shame to silence members’ internal, Spirit-led sense of right and wrong, fostering a culture that breeds complicity. When describing the relationships between shame and religious trauma, Alison Downie (2022) writes, “In such contexts, truth is always and only external. Truth is received by submission to authority, by conformity. It is not known from within” (p. 925). If “truth” is only received from the religious authorities who are enabling, perpetrating, and covering up abuse, then how does a person attune and respond to conviction from the Holy Spirit? The following section is designed to help sharpen our awareness of right and wrong so we will feel emboldened to speak out on behalf of victims despite potential pressure from religious systems to keep silent. We will outline the various types of abuse and include an application case study following one family, the Jeffersons. In the case study, we will demonstrate how the abuse unfolds within the system and identify those with some degree of complicity. Proverbs 3:27 tells us, “Do not withhold good from those to whom it is due, when it is in your power to do it.” These stories will help us to honestly reflect on where it was in our power to act on another’s behalf but we failed to do so.

Emotional and verbal abuse. Emotional abuse can be challenging to identify, as it is often subtle. Emotional abuse involves a “sustained pattern” of controlling, degrading, or coercive language that quietly erodes the victim’s confidence (Francis & Pearson, 2021, p. 5). The perpetrator does not have to use harsh language or yell and scream to be considered emotionally abusive. Verbal abuse is similar to emotional abuse but has a larger emphasis on aggressive, hurtful language toward another person or verbal threats of violence. Victims of emotional

and verbal abuse can experience severe self-doubt, to the point of questioning their own perception of reality. Examples of this type of abuse include:

- guilt trips
- extreme jealousy
- constant monitoring
- name-calling
- insults
- sarcastic or humiliating “jokes” used to show contempt
- threats of physical harm

Application. Derrick and Susan Jefferson had a whirlwind romance. Their dating and engagement relationship lasted about six months before they raced to the altar, excited to pledge their lifelong faithfulness to one another before God and their church. Derrick served as a youth pastor at their local church where Susan also worked part time as an administrative assistant. During their dating relationship, Derrick seemed easygoing. He was attentive and caring, often surprising Susan with small gifts to display his love for her. Now that they were married and living together, Derrick seemed different. He was particular about what Susan wore in public and communicated that a faithful wife ensured she did not steal the gaze of other men. Susan wanted to serve and honor her husband, so she adjusted her wardrobe and behavior according to his preferences. Still, Derrick seemed annoyed and impatient.

As his jealousy escalated, Derrick frequently accused Susan of having an affair. To prove her trustworthiness, Derrick demanded that Susan let him go through her text messages, track her location through her phone’s GPS, and monitor her use of their credit card. Susan began withdrawing from her other friendships out of fear that Derrick might think she was betraying his trust. Over the years, Susan withdrew from her community to focus on ensuring Derrick was happy.

Susan got pregnant and gave birth to two beautiful children, Josie and James. She felt hopeful their marriage was turning a corner and that her humble submission was finally paying off. However, after they emerged from the postpartum daze, Derrick got angry with Susan more frequently. What was once expressions of jealousy and suspicion turned into yelling, name-calling, and verbal threats of violence. It was not uncommon for Derrick to yell, “I should kill you for the way you talk to me!”

In a moment of bravery, Susan confided in her coworker through tears, trying to gauge if this was normal in a marriage. Her coworker and fellow church

member reminded Susan how lucky she was to have a husband who loves the Lord and serves the church faithfully. She told Susan that Derrick is a good man and that she should be careful not to provoke him to anger. Susan was reminded to show him grace and be eager to serve him, as it can be difficult to be the head of the household.

Derrick's interactions with Susan display all the hallmarks of emotional and verbal abuse. He belittles her, speaks to her as if she is crazy, monitors her every action, and threatens to harm her. Susan desires to be a dutiful, faithful wife and wants a marriage in which she feels safe and connected. Her coworker practices complicity when she excuses Derrick's behavior on the grounds of his service to the church. She reinforces Susan's fear that she is responsible for the abuse and loses a significant opportunity to support Susan and confront Derrick for the sake of the health of their marriage.

Physical abuse. Physical abuse includes intentionally injuring another's body or purposefully making someone physically uncomfortable. Examples include:

- slapping or punching
- strangling
- confinement or unlawful restraint
- burning

Application. As time goes on, Derrick's yelling and name-calling became scarier and more frequent. One night in February during an argument, Derrick slapped Susan and locked her outside in the snow while barefoot in her pajamas. She was outside for two hours begging to be let inside before a neighbor heard her. Susan played it off as an unfortunate accident to avoid Derrick's escalating rage, claiming she went outside to check the mail and forgot to bring her key. The neighbor used his phone to call Derrick, explained the "accident," and asked him to let her inside. Derrick unlocked the door and made small talk with the neighbor, laughing about his wife's mistake. When Susan entered the house, Derrick said, "I hope that taught you not to disobey me."

Susan was committed to healing her marriage and convinced Derrick to see their pastor, John, for marriage counseling. In their sessions, Derrick turned on the charm. He laughed with Pastor John about how hard it is to be married and the difficulty of practicing patience with a wife who can be so frustrating. The night before one of their sessions, Derrick got enraged in front of the children. When Susan tearfully asked him to go into the other room so the children

wouldn't see them fighting, Derrick put his hands around her neck and yelled, "I swear I will kill you if you keep disrespecting me in front of my children!" This emboldened Susan to confess to her pastor in their marriage counseling session what was happening in the house and that she was afraid he would hurt the children. When Susan was finished talking, Pastor John took a deep breath and said, "Derrick is the best youth pastor in town. He works with children all the time; you do not need to worry that he will hurt the children." He encouraged Susan to "win him with gentleness," and said that if she obeyed God and was more respectful, Derrick would not act out.

Susan decided to take her pastor's advice and tried to live peaceably with her husband as best she could. She would be vigilant about what she said and how she behaved around Derrick, staving off his abuse for a few weeks. Eventually, something would set him off, and he would physically harm her. The next day, he would bring her flowers and apologize, saying, "If you did not make me so mad, I would not have hurt you."

Derrick's escalation from emotional and verbal abuse to physical abuse displays a common progression seen in domestic violence. It is not uncommon for the perpetrator to act out in an abusive incident (e.g., hitting or slapping the victim) and follow up with "love-bombing" tactics, or grand gestures of affection, such as lavish gifts, seemingly sincere apologies, or excessive flattery (Arabi, 2023). These strategies make it difficult for the victim to trust their survival instinct to leave and pursue safety. When Derrick brings flowers to Susan and attempts to apologize for his actions (though his apology lacks a genuine acceptance of responsibility), she is lured back into a relationship with him, hopeful that maybe this time will be the last time.

To a small degree, the Jeffersons' neighbor could be considered complicit in the abuse if he noticed a continued pattern of incidents similar to the one described above and did not seek to support Susan. The more egregious act of complicity comes from the Jeffersons' pastor, John, who refuses to denounce the abuse. Instead, he counsels Susan to continue to endure Derrick's abuse, even suggesting that she is at fault. If John had a thorough understanding of physical abuse and the courage to perform his safeguarding role, he would have rebuked Derrick for his actions, urged him to participate in long-term treatment aimed at stopping the cycle of abuse, validated Susan's right to go to the police, and helped her establish a plan for safe housing for her and her children.

Spiritual abuse. Spiritual abuse is the perversion of religious or spiritual beliefs and/or power to exert control over someone else (Ellis et al., 2022). This is particularly harmful to victims, as it inherently suggests their abuse is permissible or approved of by God. Spiritual abuse also creates an environment that allows other types of abuse to fester, namely sexual abuse perpetrated by religious leaders. Spiritual manipulation and control foster a culture of absolute obedience to leaders and loyalty to the institution that makes people vulnerable to grooming tactics and silences victims. Examples include:

- misusing Scripture to coerce followers to give away all their possessions
- claiming absolute authority over people’s basic life decisions, such as how to dress, where to live, and who to marry
- elevating the spiritual leader as one who “speaks for God” and demanding unquestioned submission from the congregants or parishioners
- communicating a behavior-based acceptance model that conflates a person’s worth in the kingdom of God to their service to the church

Application. Susan and Derrick’s church grew exponentially, and Derrick was promoted to assistant pastor. They developed a close friendship with Pastor John and his wife and really believed in the mission of the church. John was charismatic and made the congregants believe they were part of the exciting work God was doing in their city. He would describe their congregation as “the only church in town that preaches the true gospel.” He preached with authority as he warned against false teachers and those who would try to divide the congregation and thwart the advancement of the kingdom of God.

Susan led the church’s women’s ministry and met weekly with the pastor to discuss ministry events. In their weekly meetings, John would ask Susan to “keep a look out” for congregants who were seeking to divide the church. He asked her to inform him of anyone who was critical of the church’s teaching, as they could be a “wolf in sheep’s clothing.” Susan felt uncomfortable with his request but wanted to stay in his good favor. When her friend, Jacqueline, expressed discomfort with the pastor’s teaching methods and claim to authority over virtually every aspect of their lives, Susan encouraged her to submit to her elders and trust the leadership God put over them. Susan told John about Jacqueline’s concerns and her encouragement to obey leadership. John commended Susan on a job well done.

Three weeks later, John told Susan that Jacqueline and her family had been removed from church membership. “I tried to call her to repentance for her disobedience, but she was not responsive. We cannot have any divisions in the

church,” he explained. Susan felt sad, confused, and guilty, but she believed she could not risk voicing her concerns. What would she do if she were kicked out of the church?

One of the primary goals of spiritual abuse is to extinguish dissension to increase the power of the spiritual leader, which cultivates complicity in the congregation. In this case, Susan functioned as a “spy” for the spiritually abusive leader, making her a complicit party in the harm done to Jacqueline. It is important to note here that Susan was also at risk of spiritual harm if she denounced the abuse and advocated for Jacqueline. However, as we recall from the story of David and Nathan, God sometimes calls us to obedience even at a potential personal cost. One of the most effective ways a church can prevent spiritual abuse is by seeking leaders with integrity over talent, character over charisma, and maturity over verbal eloquence.

Sexual abuse. Sexual abuse is any use of another person’s body for one’s own sexual gratification without their consent. It also includes *any* sexual activity perpetrated by an adult with a child under the age of eighteen, regardless of the perpetrator’s perception of the child’s consent. As we will explore in later chapters, sexual abuse often begins with nonsexual touch (such as putting a hand on a person’s knee or the small of their back) and sexually suggestive remarks. Sexual abuse includes:

- molestation and rape
- showing children or vulnerable adults pornography
- recording consensual sexual activity without permission
- voyeurism—watching others while they are naked, dressing, or having sex without their knowledge or consent
- exhibitionism—revealing one’s genitals in public or without the other’s consent
- frotteurism—rubbing one’s genitals against another person without their consent (e.g., in a crowded subway car)

Application. The Jeffersons moved in next door to Pastor John and his family. Their children were of similar ages, and Susan felt so grateful to have extra support given the tension she felt with Derrick. They spent the whole summer in John’s backyard swimming pool, laughing and enjoying one another’s company.

The Jefferson's daughter, Josie, was thirteen years old and loved spending time with John's kids. One day, Josie was in John's daughter's bedroom changing out of her bathing suit. John walked in while she was changing; she quickly grabbed her towel to cover up, thinking this was just an embarrassing mistake. John sat on his daughter's bed and told Josie that it was okay and to continue changing. Josie was confused and uncomfortable but thought, he is a pastor; this must be okay. As she took her bathing suit off, John told her how beautiful she was. Josie did not know what to do, so she apprehensively thanked him for the compliment and quickly put her clothes back on.

Josie felt unsure about what happened and wanted to talk to someone about it. She knew her parents loved and defended Pastor John, so she described her experience to her small group leader instead. Her youth leader told her that Pastor John was under a lot of stress and that Josie should wear more modest swimwear to prevent him from "lusting" after her. Josie felt embarrassed but took her mentor's advice to heart. She started wearing a T-shirt and shorts over her swimsuit when they went to John's house to swim. But John continued to watch her change and touched himself while she took her clothes off.

Josie felt ashamed, and she wanted John to stop. She eventually tried telling her mom, Susan. Susan dismissed Josie's concerns, thinking she had to be mistaken and knowing the consequences of accusing the pastor of sexual sin. The abuse continued and eventually escalated to the point where John was regularly raping Josie. One day, Josie's younger brother, James, walked in while John was fondling Josie's breasts. James ran out of the room and immediately told his mom. Susan finally believed Josie.

Susan and Derrick brought the incident to the church elders, hoping they would give advice on how to proceed. The elders told them that this issue should not be taken to the police and must be handled within the church. They said they would talk to Pastor John and put him on administrative leave for one month while he got "treatment." He would then be restored to leadership. Susan and Derrick were encouraged to talk to Josie about God's command to forgive others. They were warned that if they reported the incident to the police, it would be seen as an attempt to disgrace John and the church, and they would be removed from church membership.

This case highlights how sexual abuse flourishes in an environment of complicity. Josie's small group leader justified the pastor's actions, blamed Josie, and disobeyed her legal responsibility to report instances of child abuse. Susan shut down her daughter's plea for help by dismissing her concerns and fearing the

personal consequences of speaking against their spiritual leader. The church elders failed to denounce the abuse and initiated a cover-up attempt, using their spiritual authority to silence the victims. Additionally, commanding survivors of abuse to forgive privately without publicly acknowledging the institution's complicity or the perpetrator's responsibility is another form of spiritual abuse (Arms, 2003).

LOOK WITHIN: REFLECTION AND REPENTANCE

It is important that we do not stop at leaning in and learning about how others use their power to harm. It would be a shame if we read this book saying, "Praise God that I do not sin like they do." We all have the ability to use our power to exploit or harm, therefore we must also *look within* and be vigilant about identifying our own sinful tendencies so we can be safe for survivors of abuse. If not conducted in the context of safety, church responses to abuse and attempts to care for victims can cause further harm instead of healing. Victims may experience retraumatization and alienation from churches and other ministry institutions, which hinders their recovery process and potentially causes a systemic rupture throughout the church community. Preventing the retraumatization of abuse victims and preserving the dignity and respect of all trauma survivors begins with a recognition of relational safety.

The Tripod of Relational Safety Model (TRSM) is a comprehensive framework to understand the necessary components for safeguarding vulnerable persons developed by Dr. Gabriel Dy-Liacco. Among his many international roles, Dr. Dy-Liacco was appointed by Pope Francis to the Pontifical Commission for the Protection of Minors (PCPM) as a founding member to directly advise the pope and others on safeguarding issues. TRSM's concept of relational safety refers to a sense of safety people experience when relating with others, including their own selves. When people feel respected, listened to, and free to be their authentic selves, they can interact without fear of threat or harm. Relational safety is required on all levels of human relationships—with self, with others, within institutions, and with God—in order to make a meaningful impact. This comprehensive focus is evident in the three legs of the model: safe self, safe community, and safe ministry (see figure 1). All three components are born out of a relationship with God, which provides a template for goodness and drives our beliefs, meaning making, and values. This model illustrates how each person can manifest God's love to ourselves, each other, and the world.

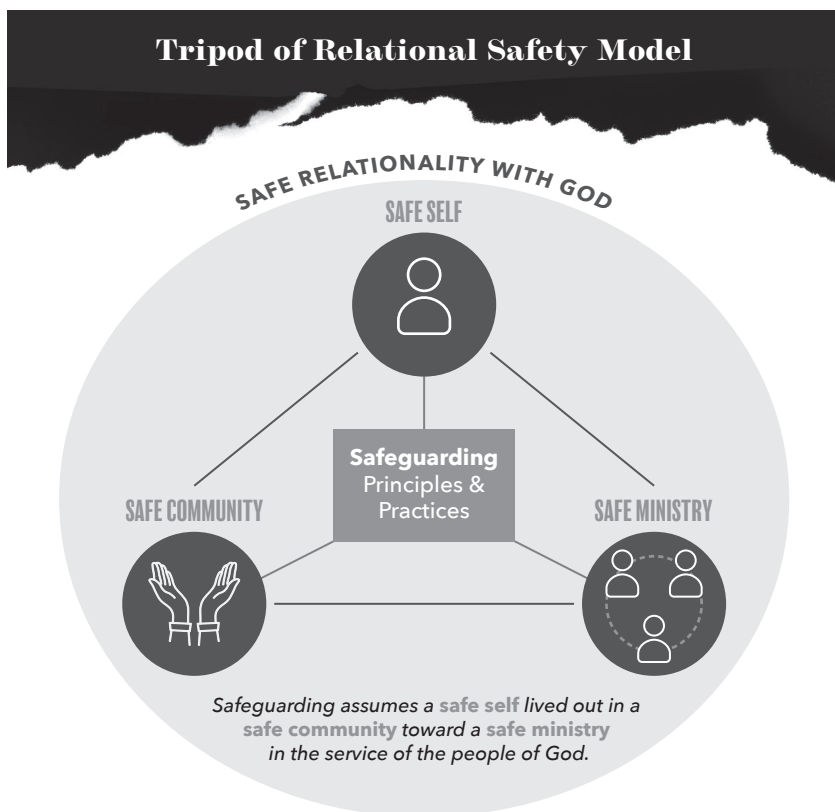


Figure 1. Tripod of Relational Safety Model. Used by permission of Catholic Safeguarding Institute

Safe self. Self-reflection is a key skill for functioning as a safe self. To care for the vulnerable without using power to meet their own needs, safeguarders must develop an awareness of their own wounds, triggers, emotional states, strengths, and challenges. This understanding fosters emotion regulation and self-compassion that enables meaningful and healthy connection with others. If a person has not developed a “safe self,” he is at risk of causing harm to himself and others. For example, if a safeguarder experiences intense anxiety at the thought of conflict as a result of unhealthy conflict resolution patterns within her family of origin, she may find herself unwilling to practice courageous confrontation when witnessing signs of abuse. Or if a spiritual leader experiences a deeply felt sense of unworthiness or self-criticism, he might use his spiritual authority to find validation through the obedience of his congregants. The movement

toward a safe self is an individual's journey toward personal maturity in all areas of functioning, including thoughts, emotions, sexuality, and spirituality.

Safe community. The safe community functions as a person's home base and a place where members are accepted as their authentic selves. This can include friend groups, family, geographic communities, and religious communities. These groups avoid gossip and slander, do not exclude members based on differences of opinion, and work together toward a common good. These are places where members are free to both rejoice and grieve together, trusting they will receive care and support. Safe communities also implement trauma-informed principles that promote healthy interactions among individuals, groups, and systems. According to the United States' Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA, 2014), these principles include (1) safety, (2) trustworthiness and transparency, (3) peer support, (4) collaboration and mutuality, (5) empowerment, voice, and choice, and (6) awareness of cultural, gender, and historic issues. Safe communities enforce these principles and act swiftly when a violation occurs to protect the victim. For example, child sexual abuse should be disclosed to law enforcement, and victims of sexual abuse should never be forced to interact with their perpetrator (even a repentant one), whether in the context of a family, community, or church setting.

Safe ministry. Safe selves who are supported by safe communities can then properly engage in safe ministry. Safe ministry involves a "victims-first" approach where individuals, especially those who are vulnerable, are prioritized over ministry projects and reputations. According to Scripture, our Christian service should benefit the most vulnerable members of society. This service should not be motivated by selfish ambition or involve any corruption. James 1:27 confirms this ministry model: "Pure and undefiled religion before God and the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their trouble, and to keep oneself unspotted from the world" (NKJV). Safe ministry is a natural overflow of safe selves and safe communities, as it requires leaders and members of faith communities to shepherd, encourage, and advocate for one another without selfish and harmful attempts to meet their own needs.

Safe ministry also involves careful application of theology and "rightly handling the word of truth" (2 Timothy 2:15). According to Rachael Denhollander, attorney and advocate for sexual abuse survivors and the first person to file charges against USA Gymnastics' doctor Larry Nasser, theological distortions elevate the risk of abuse in ministry settings. She highlights the following

common areas where ministries may unintentionally misrepresent these good and God-honoring concepts in a way that could make people more vulnerable to abuse and silence victims (Daye, 2019; Vernick, 2023):

- **Unity.** Emphasizing the *agreement* of fellow believers over the pursuit of truth and labeling people who may speak out in dissent as “divisive.”
- **Authority.** Emphasizing the *submission* of women and children over personal safety and agency.
- **Conceptualization of sin as ubiquitous.** Emphasizing the concept that *all people sin* over holding those who harm others accountable for their actions.
- **Commission priorities.** Emphasizing the mission to *maximize the number of church attendees* over the mission to protect individuals from harm and provide care for those who have already been wounded.
- **Sufficiency of Scripture.** Emphasizing the use of Scripture as the *totality of counsel* needed to the exclusion of wisdom from other sources (such as doctors) and any community collaboration.
- **Forgiveness and justice.** Emphasizing not only forgiving but also *forgetting, moving on, reconciling, and handling matters outside of court* which can silence victims, increase their risk of revictimization, and prevent accountability for perpetrators.
- **Piety.** Emphasizing that Christians should *not gossip* over the church community speaking truth and pursuing understanding and accountability.
- **Faithfulness.** Emphasizing service and loyalty *to the organization and its leaders* over care for individuals, particularly those who are vulnerable and without their voice in their own protection.

Correct teaching on these topics promotes safe ministry culture, while distortions in these theologies allows Scripture to be weaponized for control and harm instead of being used to bring freedom and righteous living as God intended.

CONCLUSION

Will you be a courageous prophet, speaking up for the vulnerable and preserving the integrity of the church? Or will you be like the Pharisees, a “white-washed tomb” who turns away from injustice toward comfortable religion (Matthew 23:27)? Maya Angelou is attributed with saying, “I did then what I

knew how to do. Now that I know better, I do better.” This book is intended to lift the veil from our eyes, revealing the places of wickedness that we might know better, and it is designed to equip you to do better through practical skills for preventing abuse and supporting trauma survivors.

His divine power has granted to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of him who called us to his own glory and excellence, by which he has granted to us his precious and very great promises, so that through them you may become partakers of the divine nature, having escaped from the corruption that is in the world because of sinful desire. For this very reason, make every effort to supplement your faith with virtue, and virtue with knowledge, and knowledge with self-control, and self-control with steadfastness, and steadfastness with godliness, and godliness with brotherly affection, and brotherly affection with love. For if these qualities are yours and are increasing, they keep you from being ineffective or unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. For whoever lacks these qualities is so nearsighted that he is blind, having forgotten that he was cleansed from his former sins. (2 Peter 1:3-9)

We pray that as you read this text, you will be empowered by God to grow in faith, virtue, knowledge, self-control, steadfastness, godliness, brotherly affection, and love so the church might be effective and fruitful in its ministry as evidence of our salvation in Christ and a reflection of the heart of God.

PERSONAL REFLECTION

1. What thoughts, feelings, and physical sensations did you experience as you read about the Jefferson family? Were there any aspects of their story that were more challenging to read?
2. What personal transformation do you hope to experience as you read this text?
3. Where do you feel tempted to look away from harm or injustice?

GROUP DISCUSSION

1. How does the Tripod of Relational Safety Model reflect God’s design for the church?
2. Consider the impact of complicity on the survivors of abuse within the church. How does complicity contribute to their sense of betrayal? What

role can leaders and members of the church play in supporting survivors?

3. Consider the ethical responsibilities of people within the church when confronted with knowledge of abuse. How does Scripture inform how you navigate these situations?

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