Addressing Difficult Issues: Sex Abuse in Church

by John Upton, BGAV executive director

Rereading the story of Jesus in the wilderness being tested by Satan reminded me of the harshness of that story. I could feel the harshness in the verb, “the Spirit drove him out.” It didn’t say the Spirit let him out, or invited him out, or called him out. The Spirit drove him out into the wilderness.

That is our story too. Life is not always smooth sailing—sometimes we must face the tough stuff.

I believe God is currently driving us out into a wilderness of church life that we have wanted to avoid, but we can’t. In recent weeks different newspapers across the country have forced the church—particularly the Baptist church—to face the truth that many people have been sexually abused and assaulted within our churches either by clergy, deacons, Sunday School teachers, youth ministers, and others. Over 700 people have reported they were sexually abused or assaulted in Baptist churches in the past 20 years. This is one of the most urgent items we need to address and own. This is our moment to start to get it right and make our churches the safest places a person can be. I regret it has taken us this long to own this crisis.

While the BGAV honors the autonomy of the local church, it also affirms that every church is accountable as well. The BGAV does not have a governing role with churches, but we do have an assistive role with churches. I would like to be specific about the ways the BGAV can assist churches as they address this crisis of sex abuse and sexual assault.

• Every church should review its policy and procedures for abuse, misconduct, and assault. There should be a clear understanding how to immediately address such issues. The BGAV is prepared to offer resources regarding processes, policies, background checks, and procedures.
Sample policies and guidelines are available to help churches structure their process of addressing sexual misconduct.

BGAV has an agreement with VIP Care that includes caring for victims of sexual abuse. The BGAV will assist a church in accessing care for those affected by such betrayal of trust.

BGAV will create a resource that will advise churches on security measures as well as offer training events for anyone responsible for minors in the church. We strongly recommend that anyone working with children or youth receive training. These items are also being covered in the BGAV certification training for youth and children’s ministers and workers.

Churches need to have a clear process of handling complaints: conducting timely, fair, and responsible investigations and reporting to authorities when appropriate.

The safety of all people is more important than the reputation of a church or of BGAV.

It is time to walk with integrity.

I take comfort in that when we are driven into the wilderness places, we will remember who we are by the grace of God and that ministering angels will meet us there—as well as Christ, who knows his way through and who will lead us to new life for all.

Inquiries about training or other resources should be directed to your regional Field Strategist. Find contact information for your Field Strategist by visiting BGAV.org/FieldStaff.

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