



Review Article

SEXUAL ABUSE AND HARASSMENT: TOPICS WE MUST TALK ABOUT. BY HABENICHT, D. (1998), JOURNAL OF ADVENTIST EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT

The issue of sexual abuse, particularly of children, is a global phenomenon that has plagued various institutions including the church or Christendom. There are many instances of sexual exploitation of young people by trusted members of the church. Many people would want for those occurrences to be secretly addressed because of the embarrassment it may have on the church fraternity. They would want sexual exploitation by members of the church swept under the carpet without addressing the social psychology of the victim because of the perceived negative effect on the religious denominations. The reality is, childhood sexual abuse committed by members of the church should be openly and frankly discussed as if it were done in the wider society. This review of Habenicht's article on 'Sexual Abuse and Harassment' by a trusted senior member of the church highlights a social phenomenon that is ongoing and one that requires openness. The openness must be in context of providing cues of such happenings, establish measures of recourse, provide the victim with the right social and psychological support systems, and imprison those who break the trust of office in this regard. This review also brings into focus current happenings of sexual exploitation of children by members of the church in an effort to contextualize the severity and currency of the phenomenon.

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INTRODUCTION

Not too long ago, I gave a weekday workshop at a church that was staggering under the impact of sexual abuse. The pastor told me that the present church membership is about one-third of what it was several years ago (Habenicht, 1998, p. 43). The issue of sexual abuse and harassment are among the top taboo matters for public discussion, particularly in Christian fora. Habenicht, a Professor of Educational and Counseling Psychology at Andrews University, Berrien Springs, Michigan, brought an important matter squarely on the table for discussion in a Christian forum, the Journal of Adventist Education. She noted that sexual abuse and harassment eat away at the core of an individual's being, and his or her religious beliefs about God and the Church (p. 43). Dr. Habenicht's comments were in reference to a senior member of the church sexually harassing young children in the church. The matter is of such profound importance that she showed its impact on the church body. The initial quotation aptly summarized the conduct of the senior member of the church on the philosophy of people and the religious philosophy of the church.

The reality of the aforementioned religious group was that some two in three people stopped attending the church as a result of the sexual abuse and harassment scandal that hovers over the head of the assembly. Habenicht wrote that paper in 1997/1998 and this is currently the experience of the Moravian church in Jamaica (in 2017- Virtue, 2017). The matter of a pastor having sexual relationship with a minor has hit the Nazareth Moravian church in St. Elizabeth, (Jamaica Observer, 2017a; 2017b; Jamaica Gleaner, 2017a). Prior to the sexual abuse scandal that hovers over the head of the Moravian church in Jamaica and by extension the general church assembly, a Pastor has alluded to the fact that church is not immune from this reality (Jamaica Gleaner, 2016). This is exactly what obtains in this article written by Habenicht. Irrespective of the clear case of child abuse in the church, people are somewhat afraid to openly speak on the matter or even condemn the actions of the spiritual leader. Habenicht spoke to this reality when she argued that these are 'Topics we must talk about' because people are more willing to sweep this under the carpet than have the matter ventilated and addressed. The same thing that Habenicht addressed in her article—the openness to discuss sexual abuse and harassment in the church—is similar to our experience in Jamaica where religious people would prefer the matter to disappear like the wind. Campbell (2017), in an article in the tabloid titled 'Church rape cover-up: Sex-abuse victims intimidated by predator pastors', reflects the

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same rationale for Dr. Habenicht's article written back in 1998. The reality of this similar situation occurring in our Jamaican society (see Virtue, 2017; Jamaica Gleaner, 2017b, 2017c) clearly reflecting a societal dilemma. The author suggested 'saving faces and image' to be the reason why cover up occurs in cases of sexual abuse and harassment in the church. She wrote, "The members are struggling to rebuild their spiritual community and hoping that someday their young people will return" (p. 43). Such a statement encapsulates personal image and not truth as the child's or children's psychosocial state is never discussed openly and measured institutionally to identify perpetrators of child sexual abuse in the church. The matter of sexual abuse of children does not only have a crippling effect on the image of the church; it has a longlasting psychological effect on the victim as well as their family and the wider community. This is evident by the reduction in church attendance and membership highlighted by Dr. Habenicht. In order to fully grasp the importance of Dr. Habenicht's call to 'talk about' sexual abuse, the prevalence of cases around the world and how people are treated must needs be brought into focus. A previous case identified in Barbados further validates the reason why we must 'talk about' sexual abuse and harassment, especially against the vulnerable such as children, women and orphans. The case is reported as follows:

I called the police. As I recounted the events of the night, what I recall most of this dialogue, was that it seemed very important to the police that I understand that I was not 'raped'. Rape, two officers, made clear for me that morning, could not take place between a man and a wife, and unless they were separated a period of one year (it was seven months) and therefore legally separated, rape did not exist. As it were, we were still man and wife. Admittedly, while it was as hard for me to be subjective that morning, as it is still now – the police were not offended by this cruel and violent act, rather they spent their efforts that morning in humiliating me – in diminishing the occurrences of that night to something insignificant and of little consequence, while to me, the events of that night had possibly more reverberations onto my life than any other event of my thirty-three years (Barbados Free Press, 2012)

Sexual abuse and harassment against vulnerable people within our society has been ongoing for many years and quite often people seek to protect the perpetrators and not the victims, particularly when the case is reported against a pastor or a husband (Peters and Bourne, 2012a, 2012b; Bourne et al., 2015). Habenicht contextualized the matter of sexual abuse and harassment, forwarding that the philosophy of trust (or mistrust) is broadened whenever this occurs in a society and warns against hiding the issue because of personal gratifications. She argued that when the issue of interpersonal trust is broken, it may be extremely difficult to mend or 'rebuild'. It is upon this premise Habenicht opined that when sexual abuse occurred it may cause the faith of many Christian victims to diminish as well as their philosophical belief in God. Hence, she wrote, "The foundations of personality and the relationship with God are lost" (p. 43) as a result of sexual abuse by senior members of the church. She continued by saying that "Rebuilding trust demands an arduous personal struggle" (p. 43), which clearly extends beyond the victim to the wider community, which encases the Christian community. Although the author began referencing a particular

congregation, she extended the conversation to include the wider society—the globe.

She chided Christians for their reluctance in addressing the matter and equally warns them against using reverse psychology—turning a blind eye on the matter and heaping scorn on the victim instead of the perpetrators simply because of their status in the church. So "we close our eyes to the compelling needs of children and adults around us" (Habenicht, 1998, 43) who are hurting as a result of sexual abuse and harassment, clearly demonstrated in the experience of the woman in Barbados. Habenicht expanded the discourse of sexual abuse and harassment from children in the church to people in general, especially women and children. She noted that reports of child abuse and harassment must be stopped by encouraging people to speak out. In attempting to provide a rationale for the call of reporting child abuse and harassment, the author contended that in the United States 1.9 percentage points of children are sexually abused, 4.3 percentage points physically abused and 2.7 percentage points are neglected on an annual basis. The matter was made even more devastating when the author forwarded that 10-to-25 percentage points of female preadolescents have had sexual relations with an adult—an indication of sexual abuse. Then, Habenicht, using empirical studies, revealed that 38 percentage points of females were sexually abused before their 18th birthday. Although the author did not provide any statistics for the Caribbean on the matter or even Jamaica, the matter is not different in Jamaica. Using data on Jamaica, Bourne and his colleagues have shown that the average age of first coitus is less than 15 years for both males and females (Bourne, 2010a, 2010b; Bourne and Charles, 2010; Bourne, et al., 2010). As if the matter had not been totally ventilated, Dr. Habenicht reported that 1 in 50 children are sexually abused at church schools in the United States (p. 44). The reality of sexual abuse and misconduct have been occurring in the United States as well as in Jamaica, which goes to the heart of the author's call to 'speak out' on sexual abuses and harassment, especially against vulnerable groups as children and females.

A startling revelation was made by Habenicht, using survey sponsored by Wellesley College Center for research on women and the National Organization for women legal Defense, that "The girls reported that sexual harassment happened in all kinds of schools, and that schools were less likely to do something about it when the harasser was a teacher" (p. 44). Such findings speak to the systematic 'cover up' of sexual misconduct in the society, which was also highlighted by Campbell. Campbell had postulated that sexual misconduct by religious people has been occurring in Jamaica and that there is a carefully orchestrated effort in under reporting the matter, which is what obtained in the current scandal of the Moravian pastor in Jamaica (Jamaica Gleaner, 2017a). In the case of the Moravian pastor, it was a young female and one wonders if personnel at the school were cognizant of the behaviour of this senior religious leader. Against this backdrop, Habenicht asked, "What can we do to prevent and deal with sexual abuse and harassment in our schools at all level?" (p. 45). Having asked the previously mentioned question, Dr. Habenicht suggested that philosophical issues such as screening, signs and symptoms, to policies, procedures, and attitude of school's personnel may be used to address the sexual abuse and harassment of vulnerable groups in the society. She contended that if institutions begin with policies and procedures or

guidelines, these would provide cues to identify possible cases of child sexual abuse in our society.

With a sense of understanding that sexual abuse cases are occurring in the church, the author admonished the Seventh-Day Adventist Movement about complacency and a belief that they are not immune to such realities. She opined that “[This] community is not immune from child sexual abuse” (p. 460). The philosophical issues for the author are 1) trust or mistrust; 2) ethics; 3) scope of incidence; 4) prevalence of cases; 5) Christian philosophy of truth, honesty, credibility, value, and decency. Accordingly, she cautioned: We are also committed to spiritually assisting abused and abusive individuals and their families in their healing and recovery process, and to holding church professionals and church lay leaders accountable for maintaining their personal behavior as is appropriate for persons in positions of spiritual leadership and trust (p. 46).

In summary, the article addressed all the philosophical issues such as reality, epistemology and axiology by way of using child sexual abuse and harassment. Habenicht’s topic is equally germane today as sexual abuse continues unabated in the society and both leaders and members of the church are intimately involved in this societal scourge. Since Habenicht wrote the article in 1998, sexual abuse has risen exponentially around the world suggesting that her deep seated concern and revelations must again be placed on the front burner, especially within the context of the recent developments and revelations in Jamaica—sexual scandals of pastors, other church officials, and church members.

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