

## Episode 92, Kimberlee Norris, Sexual Abuse and the Church

**Speaker 1** [00:00:04] Welcome to Engage360, Denver Seminary's podcast. Join us as we explore the redemptive power of the gospel and the life changing truth of Scripture at work in our culture today.

**Don Payne** Hi again, friends. This is Engage360 from Denver Seminary. I'm your host, Don Payne, and before we get underway with this episode, I need to let you know that this conversation is going to address some pretty sensitive issues that might get a bit too close to home or maybe spark some trauma for some. We're going to be talking about sexual abuse and the church. So, I just wanted to let you know in advance in case this topic is too raw or too painful. We're committed to having the tough conversations that we need to have in order for the power of the gospel to be specific and to be connected to where it's most needed. But we don't want to prompt or maybe resuscitate any unnecessary struggles. So, if this or any of the issues we address on the podcast happen to intersect your personal journey in a way that you're just not in a place to engage right now, you may want to take a break for this episode. And I also encourage you to seek out whatever professional assistance you might need. And if we can help point you to some of that assistance, please let us know. Sadly, one of the one of the issues that plagues the church these days is sexual abuse. And as difficult and egregious as this is, we need to address it. That's part of what we're here for at Denver Seminary and part of what this podcast is about, to train people to engage the needs of the world with the redemptive power of the gospel. And those needs are many. But we're really honored today to have as our guest Kimberlee Norris, who is an attorney, and she is the co-founder of an organization called MinistrySafe. Kimberlee is a partner in the Fort Worth, Texas, law firm of Love & Norris. They provide child sexual abuse expertise to ministries around the world. After representing victims of child sexual abuse for more than 20 years, Kimberlee and her husband, Gregory Love, saw recurring predictable patterns in predatory behavior. And so their organization, MinistrySafe, grew out of a desire to place this information into the hands of ministry professionals and provide churches of all sizes with some effective safety protocols to protect the Church and its children from these devastating impacts of child sexual abuse. And I think MinistrySafe has trained over 11,000 ministry personnel, or does train over 11,000 each month, in various formats live and on live and online. Kimberlee, welcome to Engage 360. We're glad to have you here.

**Kimberlee Norris** Thanks. Happy to be here.

**Don Payne** I guess as we get started, maybe we need to define some terms for the sake of clarity. Can you help us clarify what we mean or should mean by terms like sexual abuse, sexual assault, sexual harassment?

**Kimberlee Norris** Sure. So sexual abuse from a legal standpoint refers to child sexual abuse. So an adult sexually abusing a child or another child sexually abusing a child, peer to peer issues. Sexual assault from a legal standpoint is typically adult to adult behaviors. So any non-consensual sexual interaction is a crime. I mean, if somebody is forced to have sexual interaction with someone, but adult behavior is sexual assault. Sexual harassment is typically a circumstance in the workplace. So an individual is forced to endure inappropriate sexual interaction in some form or any context in which because of their gender, they are discriminated against in the workplace.

**Don Payne** Maybe it would be helpful for listeners to have just a little bit of background of how you and your husband got involved in this through your legal practice. What, go ahead.

**Kimberlee Norris** Sure. This is year 31 for me in this realm, addressing child sexual abuse issues. So if we are actually in the courtroom, it's in a tiny little context. And that is we are representing a victim in a circumstance where a child has been sexually abused while his or her parents were participating in a cult and the abuser was in spiritual authority over that family. So in other words, the abuser used that context to essentially fish for kids. As we litigated in this realm, we began to see patterns in predatory behavior to the degree that when the phone calls come today, we can essentially finish the story for the individual who's calling looking for a legal representation. So the standards of care are identical and Christ based environments. And what I mean by that is what was allowed to occur that should not have been allowed, what should have been in place to protect that child from inappropriate sexual interaction, those are standards of care and they're identical in Christ based environments. And some five or six, seven years in, we began to receive phone calls from some pretty significant ministries, some of which were international in scope, to help them address circumstances where child sexual abuse had occurred and essentially the train had left the tracks. So we do what we do, in part because we're believers and we do this work in a lot of different realms. One of my more significant secular clients is the U.S. Olympic Committee who retained us to help create safe sport protocols. But we created MinistrySafe to create access points for Christian ministries to address child sexual abuse and child protection and prevent child sexual abuse more effectively in the church, Christian ministries, Christian camps, Christian schools.

**Don Payne** Well I'm really grateful for the work you're doing on that. Is it safe to say that the church and ministry organizations in general are kind of late to the game in paying attention to this? Or is everybody late to the game?

**Kimberlee Norris** A little bit of both. I mean, I think the Church, and I'm saying that, I'm using Capital C, the Church tends to be behind the ball as it relates to this risk. And that's in part because we're not licensed. I don't think we should be licensed. I don't want any more government in my life, and I certainly don't want the government telling my church how to run its business. But at the same time, because we're not licensed, we don't have continuing education requirements, typically, we don't have licensure standards of care that we have to comply with. And so we tend to be behind the ball. We're also uniquely susceptible to child sexual abuse risk because we're grace based. You know, we say come as you are. No perfect people. I can't tell you how many times I've heard "that was before he knew Jesus." We don't have a great understanding of how the risk might manifest. And because we don't have a great understanding and we don't tend to do it, but we're never going to be accidentally excellent at this.

**Don Payne** Yeah. I love that phrase. Does that mean, then, that sexual abuse of various types, whether we're talking about abuse or assault or even harassment, I guess for those who consider the church as their workplace, is there a difference in how prevalent that is within the church? I know we would have to broad brush here a little bit. But is there a difference between how prevalent it is in the church compared to other organizations, other environments?

**Kimberlee Norris** So my area of expertise is child sexual abuse. So I can't really speak to adult to adult behaviors or even sexual harassment for purposes from a level of expertise. But I would say in general, child sexual abuse is not any more common in the church than it is elsewhere, except that we know that abusers who, preferential offenders, and I'll define that for you in a minute, but preferential offenders who prefer a child as a sexual partner, almost without exception, have an age and gender of preference that they prefer to interact with. And because we gather kids in

large numbers in a lot of churches and ministry programs, we become an attractive target for the preferential offender. And the majority of offenders, not all, but the majority that are that, you know, you're seeing media coverage about and significantly impacting church public perception of ministry programs tend to be preferential offenders who have, who repeat their offenses over and over again. They have many, many victims. So because we are grace based, because we don't tend to question people's motivation about why they want to serve, because we're heavily volunteer driven in many ministries, we assume that people's motivations are appropriate when sometimes they're not. And we don't, as I say, we don't recognize predatory behavior when we encounter it. Therefore, we become uniquely susceptible in some sense. I don't think the statistical prevalence is higher than it is in other child serving contexts.

**Don Payne** Okay.

**Kimberlee Norris** But most other child serving contexts understand reporting requirements, understand standards of care, and that is not the case commonly in the church.

**Don Payne** Okay, so it sounds like there are some senses in which the conditions are ripe within a lot of church settings because of the under-regulated, under licensed, or lack of licensure and just the gathering of children in these spaces. It's more of a ripe, ripe environment for it to happen in some ways.

**Kimberlee Norris** I think that's true. I mean, to be frank, the church in general, and there are notable exceptions. I mean, I'll correct a couple of your stats. We train about 50,000 ministry staff members per month and we tipped our 2 million mark last month. So we're making a dent. But the church tends to be pretty untrained and uninformed about how child sexual abuse might come about. So a big part of the training that we undertake addresses the grooming process of the abuser, how the abuser selects specific children, how the abuser prepares a child for inappropriate sexual interaction, how they introduce sexual touch through barrier testing and erosion, how they keep the child silent after the fact, and the reality that molesters, almost without exception, groom the gatekeepers. So they groom the ministry leaders, they groom parents to believe that they're helpful, trustworthy, responsible people. And that is because what every preferential offender needs is trusted time alone with your kids. And you're not going to create that opportunity for someone that you don't deem to be trustworthy. So that's why when these ministry scenarios hit the news, you almost always hear, "I'm so shocked." Sometimes you hear, sometimes you hear, "I don't believe it."

**Don Payne** Because those who've done the grooming are or have great facility at what they're doing.

**Kimberlee Norris** Right.

**Don Payne** It'd be good, I think, to have you talk a little bit more about that. I'd wanted to have you address that grooming process anyway, and some of our listeners may not be familiar with that term or that concept of grooming. So if you don't mind, go back through some of that and say a little more about those, about that grooming process.

**Kimberlee Norris** So I'll start with this. Most people's understanding of child sexual abuse risk revolves around the concept of stranger danger. And you know, we came by it honestly, because the government addressed this back in the fifties and sixties and taught us as a generation that

strangers were the dangerous component for children where sexual abuse is concerned. It was in cartoons back in the day. But the reality is 90% of kids who are sexually abused are abused by someone that they know and trust. It is not a, it is someone inside the proverbial fence. So the first part of the grooming process is gaining access and preferential offenders, who is the primary danger to the church, have prolific offense rates, and they're going to gravitate toward career and volunteer opportunities related to children who are within their age and gender preference. So they groom the gatekeepers. They're pretty good at figuring out what kids want. But let's be frank. You're probably a parent. Did your, do your kids want anything? And how shy are they about communicating what they want? So they're good at figuring out what kids want or need. They're giving it to them. They're skilled at kind of peer like communication with kids. Once they've targeted specific children who are within their age and gender of preference, they select a specific child, or a number of children, that tends to be a child who's unconnected or on the fringe or in need in some way. It can be a child who's looking for someone to follow or trust. Or a child from a broken family. Or single parent home. It can be a child who's already involved in alcohol or drugs, which is just a real tool for the offender, because both alcohol and drugs lower inhibitions and muddy the water about what actually happened. Sometimes the child doesn't even know what happened because he or she is impaired. It can be a child already interested in pornography or sex, and a child interested in sex as any child past a certain age because part of natural human development. The molester will introduce nudity and sexual touch as the third element of the grooming process. So they'll figure out what a child will accept, now, in terms of touch, in terms of conversation, in terms of subject matters, and then by repeated exposure, they'll push back what that child will accept. And that's always going to, molesters tend to be touchy with kids, which is a reason why churches should have bright line policies in place about physical touch with kids in the program. "This is okay," "this is not" very clearly defined.

**Don Payne** Yeah, good.

**Kimberlee Norris** But they'll interject sexual discussion and joking as part of this, kind of judging interest. Are you interested? Will you tell? They'll incorporate playful touch like pants-ing, wrestling, tickling, roughhousing, those kinds of behaviors in order to push back physical barriers or boundaries. And they tend to introduce nudity in some form, whether, quote unquote, accidentally or by creating a culture where nudity is acceptable or cool in some form. Once sexual touch has occurred, the last part of the grooming process is keeping the victim silent. That's commonly, secrecy is woven into the entire process. So the molester is giving that child stuff, giving them access to things, giving them privileges, giving them access to things their parents won't let them do, for instance. They use shame and embarrassment to shame a child into silence.

**Don Payne** Can you give us an example of that? What kinds of things do they say to silence kids?

**Kimberlee Norris** Yeah, so little kids, younger kids, don't know that bodies have predictable physiological response to sexual touch, predictable response. But younger kids don't know that yet. And nor should they, because that's not at the age of development that they are. But molesters will use that predictable physiological response to shame a child into silence. Say things like "you participated." "Your body responded." "I think you liked it." Those sorts of things. The number one reason kids don't tell in every study for the last 20 some odd, 30 years, "If I tell, no one's going to believe me." And molesters will tell a child, "If you tell, nobody's going to believe you. Do you think they're going to believe you or me? I'm going to tell them that you're lying, and you'll get in trouble for lying. And, oh, by the way, you tried the beer, you tried the alcohol, you participated, too. I might get in trouble, but you will, too." So they'll threaten a child into silence.

“No one's going to believe you if you tell. This would hurt your mother. This would wreck our youth group.” So they'll use that to keep a child silent after the fact as well. There's some real regular common grooming behaviors that we talk about in all our trainings that all should be included in and addressed in policies and procedures. So these are all ways in which the church can respond more appropriately than what we currently do.

**Don Payne** Okay. That's really, really helpful. I think you may have mentioned this a little bit earlier, something about power structures or power abuse in the church. How does all of that play a role in this?

**Kimberlee Norris** I think the biggest way in which I encounter it playing a role, having the kind of interaction that I have regularly with ministry leaders, is ministry leaders are groomed as gatekeepers. So they drank the Kool-Aid. They believed this person, typically. And they don't understand this risk, typically, they don't know how it would come about. They don't understand the grooming process. They don't understand, they probably don't even know about the existence of the preferential offender. Sometimes it is not so much a power paradigm, so much as it is a pastoral framework where a pastor has a pastor's heart and wants to provide ministry services to everyone. And there are some people who shouldn't be in our churches, not next to kids. Not working with kids. So I think that is a dynamic that occurs over and over again. Occasionally, if it's a male who's molesting a female child and the female was a early to mid-teen, there's some sexism that comes into play where the interaction is characterized as an affair rather than child sexual abuse. So there's that element occasionally as well.

**Don Payne** You're reminding me of how in so many cases in the church, this is perhaps true everywhere, but particularly in these cases, our greatest assets have a soft underbelly. They have a set of come along weaknesses with them. So the grace that is at the basis of the church sometimes creates the environment where things can go unattended that can be really toxic and really dangerous. And likewise for many ministry leaders who have what you called a pastor's heart, can be played to, that can be manipulated in some ways.

**Kimberlee Norris** Sure. And that's particularly true when, I mean, part of what we try to do in every training we undertake is we want to, at an absolute minimum, give ministry staff members and volunteers a different category for the behavior they might encounter.

**Don Payne** Okay.

**Kimberlee Norris** Because a lot of people don't even have the category. They just.

**Don Payne** Yeah, they don't even know it's a thing.

**Kimberlee Norris** Yeah, “that was odd. That seems strange. That was weird. I don't know why that was going on or why he was doing that.” So a lot of abusers fly under the radar because people don't have eyes to see. And the good news for the church is that the grooming process is viewable. Common grooming behaviors are viewable. And if it's viewable, it's subject to supervision. And if it's subject to supervision, it's preventable.

**Don Payne** Okay. Yeah. You're giving me some hope now because, you know, thus far, I think if, you know, many of our listeners might be thinking, “gee, I'm never going to let my kids go to church again. This is this is not worth the risk.” But you obviously have training and expertise that

can give churches hope and some tools to work with. I loved your phrase, the bright lines that can be drawn. So turn us in that direction, if you would, and give us some just a few tips or some general directions on how churches can begin to prevent and combat this kind of child sexual abuse.

**Kimberlee Norris** Sure. So we believe that the solution starts with training and, you know, training has got to address the grooming process of the abuser. It's got to correct misconceptions like stranger danger. When I get called in to a scenario that's catastrophic in a ministry setting, I always ask, "What did you have here to protect?" And what I hear about are criminal background checks and, you know, we got to, you have to do it. It is a standard of care, but it's not the standalone safety system or silver bullet that the church tends to think it is.

**Don Payne** And then that and that alone might be the big learning for many listeners in many churches. That that does not, that only goes so far.

**Kimberlee Norris** Yeah. Less than 10% of abusers will encounter the criminal justice system ever. Department of Justice, a couple of years ago said less than 3%.

**Don Payne** Wow.

**Kimberlee Norris** That's in part because two out of three kids don't tell even today. That's in part because adults minimize. That's in part because families say "we're just going to handle this within the family", etc., etc.. If it's not reported, it's not going to be prosecuted. So what we think gets it done is what we call the five part safety system. And it starts with training, sexual abuse awareness training, looks at the grooming process, looks at common grooming behaviors, corrects misconceptions like stranger danger, or like "we have a criminal background check in place", like as if that was a, you know, recommendation. And addresses the reporting requirements. Here's what's required in every state related to reporting child abuse and neglect. The second part of the safety system that we advocate is what we call skillful screening. But what it is, is effective screening processes. So asking the right questions. Training, screening staff members, managerial personnel. Anybody who's going to hire or fire people should understand male and female offender characteristics. And we know a whole lot about male and female offenders in the convicted population because 98% of them participate in offender studies. And they do that because if they don't, they can't get probation. So we know a lot about offenders and we know, we train people how to ask the right questions that would reveal high risk responses. The third part would be a criminal background check. Fourth would be policies and procedures. And that goes back to those bright line expressions. "This is okay," "This is not" very clearly defined, particularly as it relates to touch, but other policy expressions as well. And then the last part is supervision. It's the two adult rule. It's having ratios in place. It's unscheduled drop ins, supervision and oversight. Doing what you say you do in order to properly supervise children in ministry programs.

**Don Payne** That's really helpful, Kimberlee, and really gives us some specifics on how the church can, in fact, be a safe place. What about in those instances where sexual abuse within the church has already occurred, it's been brought to light? What guidance can you give for how churches can support the abused and support the families where this occurs?

**Kimberlee Norris** So first and foremost, report. Know your state reporting requirements. So it starts with that. You know, if it's not reported, no accountability occurs. And just from the get go,

more kids are going to be abused by the same abuser. And that's inadequate accountability or support for the victim himself or herself. The report and secondly, avoid any circumstance where the victim is supposed to forgive the abuser in any sort of short order. A lot of churches will try to get individuals in the same room and have the abuser apologize to the victim, and that's supposed to make it okay. That it's cheap forgiveness. It is compounding the abuse, in my opinion. And again, that starts with an understanding, this is it is almost never a one time deal. So churches, church leaders will listen to the abuser say "This is the only time this has ever happened. It'll never happen again. I'm so repentant. I'm so contrite. I would just like to say I'm sorry." And then Christian Charity comes into play and that's just compounding the damage because it's cheap forgiveness. So, you know, understanding what supportive resources are available in your geographic area is important. Creating a string of skilled, licensed professional counselors to whom the church can refer people, you know, looking to see what resources are available online and national contacts, what are available locally in order to support abuse survivors. These are all good ideas. My experience in this realm is that, you know, obviously this isn't first and foremost about not being sued, but my experience is ministries get sued because of how they treat people after they come forward.

**Don Payne** Interesting. I really appreciate the specificity of all of this, because that really does give hope. And, you know, a shout out here to the churches who really are doing it well, who've done their homework and have taken this seriously. And I think you probably know far better than I do some of those churches that have done a really good job of trying to put in place the protocols and the procedures that they need to keep people safe. And just want to recognize that those are out there, and there are folks who have really taken this seriously and are doing it well. And I appreciate the guidance you've given, the encouragement for churches who need to think more seriously about this. And also. Go ahead.

**Kimberlee Norris** As a shout out as well to the seminaries who are getting in the game. So I'm faculty at Dallas Theological Seminary. I teach a class on, every spring, on preventing child sexual abuse and ministry contexts. Denver Seminary, your institution is hosting some training events that are available online. So yeah, there, I think that this issue has become such a big framer of public perception. There's been so much media coverage. There's been so many issues that are framing congregational perception that lots of ministries, some are doing it because they're trying to avoid the bad press, but others are being proactive rather than reactive. And that's exciting to see. That was not always the case.

**Don Payne** Yeah, it really is. And, you know, you've mentioned a couple of things that would probably be fodder for another few conversations theologically. When you've mentioned how grace or our perceptions of grace, forgiveness, what it means to have a pastor's heart, those are theological themes that need a much deeper dove. They need far deeper reflection on what do we mean by grace? Because, I mean, it's very easy. I see this, you probably have as well, that that the grace card gets played fairly glibly, and it basically equates to, "well we're just going to let somebody off the hook, turn a blind eye to something" because, you know, we want to be graceful. And we've got to do some deeper theological thinking about whether that really is what grace means. And forgiveness, likewise, what does it really mean to forgive beyond simply owning something or saying that one is sorry? These are these are thick realities. They need a lot more attention.

**Kimberlee Norris** Exactly. And our children can't pay the cost for our desire to appear gracious.

**Don Payne** That's well-put. This has been so helpful. Sobering, but deeply helpful. And we're grateful for the work that you and your husband are doing and grateful to the Lord for everything egregious that has not happened as a result of what you're doing.

**Kimberlee Norris** Yeah, exactly.

**Don Payne** That's the metric that I guess we'll only know in heaven. But the Lord knows all the evil that has been avoided because of your efforts. And that is considerable. And we're just really grateful for it. Friends, we've been visiting with Kimberlee Norris from Fort Worth, Texas. She and her husband run MinistrySafe and do incredible work in helping churches know how to protect children. So I really encourage you to visit their website and visit our website, [DenverSeminary.edu](http://DenverSeminary.edu). And as Kimberlee mentioned, we'll be having a webinar here. But even if you're listening to this after that webinar takes place, you should be able to get back on our website and view that. So I would really encourage you to do that. Kimberlee, thanks so much.

**Kimberlee Norris** Yep, you're welcome.

**Don Payne** Friends, if this, if you found this helpful or any of our podcasts helpful, we really would appreciate it if you would take just a moment and give us a rating or a review on your favorite podcast platform, that'd be really helpful to us. And let me request as well that you visit our website for other resources. We've got a stream of really helpful resources on a variety of topics that you can access through [DenverSeminary.edu](http://DenverSeminary.edu). And if you'd like to communicate with us here at the podcast, just email us at [Podcast@DenverSeminary.edu](mailto:Podcast@DenverSeminary.edu). So we'll be talking to you again really soon with another relevant topic. And in the meantime, may the Lord bless you and give you good guidance and encouragement in all that He's given you to do. Take care.