

A Bird in the Air or a Nest in the Hair?

Pastoral Care for Adults Expressing a Sexual Attraction to Children but who Deny Acting on these Thoughts

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“You cannot prevent the birds from flying in the air over your head, but you can certainly prevent them from building a nest in your hair.”

—Martin Luther¹

Introduction

The man squirms in the seat in front of you, clearly uncomfortable. “Pastor,” he says, “I have a problem I don’t know what to do about. Ever since I was 13, I’ve had unwanted thoughts about children. I mean, I’m sexually attracted to them. I try to stop thinking that way but sometimes I’m in church watching the children’s choir and, try as I might, I find myself attracted to some of the boys. I’ve never acted on these thoughts, Pastor, and I never will—but I’m tormented by my mind. Can you help me?”

Working with child abuse experts and perhaps legal counsel, the Pastor will need to determine if this confession² requires a mandated report in the state in which the church is located.³ The pastor may also have to inform others in the church who can work with the pastor and the parishioner on an appropriate safety plan. If, though, there is no evidence of abuse, and it appears the man has not acted on his sexual thoughts about children, what should pastoral care look like?

1. Ewald M. Plass, *What Luther Says* (1959), 1344.

2. For an overview of the limits of confidentiality in cases of child abuse, see Victor I. Vieth, “Child Abuse and the Lutheran Confessional: A Call to Elevate Christ’s Teachings on Children Above Church Traditions,” *Currents in Theology & Mission*, 46, no. 3 (2019): 50.

3. The pastor does not need to hear direct evidence of abuse, he simply needs to have a “reasonable suspicion” to make a report. Accordingly, the pastor may want to consider the following risk factors: does the parishioner have children? Has the parishioner been involved in youth ministry? Has the parishioner had contact with children in the age range and gender he or she is expressing an interest in? Has the parishioner acknowledged accessing sexually exploitive images of children (a crime in and of itself that needs to be reported)? Has the parishioner said or done anything that might suggest he acted on his or her sexual thoughts about children? If there is any doubt, the pastor should err on the side of caution and reach out to the authorities. Keep in mind, though, that many authorities will not investigate unless there is an actual outcry or admission of abuse.

Concern for the spiritual needs of the parishioner must be balanced with concern for the children in the church who God has entrusted to the pastor’s care.

This is an important question. The pastor who errs in one direction or another may contribute to the risk the parishioner may harm himself or eventually harm a child. Concern for the spiritual needs of the parishioner must be balanced with concern for the children in the church who God has entrusted to the pastor’s care.

To assist in navigating this complex subject, this paper includes an overview of research on adults sexually attracted to children. The reader should keep in mind this is simply a general overview of the literature and the studies referenced may or may not be applicable in working with a particular congregant sexually attracted to children. Moreover, research on persons sexually attracted to minors who do not act on these thoughts is still “in its infancy.”⁴

Nonetheless, an overview of the literature may empower a pastor or other spiritual care provider to ask pertinent questions relevant to ministering to a person attracted to minors as well as making mental health and other referrals. This is critical because, according to one study, 19% of adults sexually attracted to children reached out to a pastor or other faith leader for help.⁵ To aid clergy in addressing the needs of those sexually attracted to children, the literature review is followed by fifteen recommendations for tending to the spiritual needs of an adult attracted to minors.

4. Melissa D. Grady & Jill S. Levenson, “Prevalence Rates of Adverse Childhood Experiences in a Sample of Minor-Attracted Persons: A Comparison Study,” *Traumatology* 27, no.2 (2021): 227.

5. Jill S. Levenson and Melissa D. Grady, “Preventing Sexual Abuse: Perspectives of Minor-Attracted Persons About Seeking Help,” *Sexual Abuse* 31, no.8 (2018): 991, 999.

Research on adults sexually attracted to children

If the church is to be an effective tool in preventing child sexual abuse, it is important to learn strategies for assisting individuals sexually attracted to children from acting on these thoughts. In order to do this, it is critical to examine research relevant to this topic. To this end, a brief literature review is provided here with citations to enable readers to explore this issue deeper.

Awareness of sexual attraction to children begins in adolescence and is a lifelong condition

It is during adolescence that individuals typically become aware of a sexual attraction to prepubescent children,⁶ although this is often “a slow process of awareness, starting with early indications that the objects of their attractions were different from their peers.”⁷ One individual with a sexual attraction to children describes the realization this way:

I didn't really think that there was anything wrong with it when I was like 12 and 13...Like it was all just in my head, so it didn't really matter. But when I got to, I guess, 14 and 15 and I started realizing that no one else was like me in that regard...I guess I questioned a lot, myself, why I was different. Then by the time I hit 16, I knew it was very, very much not a good thing. It would really be upsetting for me because your sexual drive is something that's always engaged and it's one of the strongest drives that we have as human beings... There's no situation where I could ever realize or act on that urge without hurting someone, and so that for me was really confusing to want to do something, but to know that it was associated with being really, really terrible for someone else.⁸

As reflected in this person's comments, a sexual attraction to children is a not a temporary phase but rather a lifelong thought pattern.⁹

6. Ryan T. Shields, et al, “Help Wanted: Lessons on Prevention from Young Adults with a Sexual Interest in Prepubescent Children,” *Child Abuse & Neglect* 105 (2020): 1, citing S.D. Goode, *Understanding and Addressing Adult Sexual Attraction to Children: A Study of Pedophiles in Contemporary Society* (2010); J.A. Houtepen, et al, “Being Sexually Attracted to Minors: Sexual Development, Coping with Forbidden Feelings, and Relieving Sexual Arousal in Self-Identified Pedophiles,” *Journal of Sex & Marital Therapy* 42, no.1 (2016): 48-69.

7. Shields, et al, “Help Wanted.”

8. Shields, “Help Wanted,” 6.

9. Allyn Walker, *A Long, Dark Shadow*, (2021), 7; Klaus M. Beier, Ulmut C. Oezdemir, Eliza Schlinizig, Anna Groll, Elena Hupp, Tobias Hellenschmidt, “Just dreaming of them? The Berlin Project for Primary Prevention of Child Sexual Abuse by Juveniles (PPJ),” *Child Abuse & Neglect* (2016): 1, 2. (“It can be assumed that sexual preference manifests during adolescence and remains stable through the lifespan.”)

If the church is to be an effective tool in preventing child sexual abuse, it is important to learn strategies for assisting individuals sexually attracted to children from acting on these thoughts.

The percentage of adults sexually attracted to children

It is difficult to determine the percentage of men and women sexually attracted to children. According to the American Psychiatric Association, the “highest possible prevalence for pedophilic disorder in the male population is approximately 3-5%” and for females “it is likely a small fraction of the prevalence of males.”¹⁰ However, not every person with sexual thoughts about children meets the diagnostic criteria of pedophilia. In one study, 9.8% of men and 4.2% of women “reported some sexual interest in children.”¹¹ In breaking these numbers down, 3% of women expressed some interest in viewing sexual abuse images of children, 2% were sexually attracted to children and had some interest in “sexual activity” with children, and 1% had fantasized about children and had masturbated to these fantasies.¹² Among men, 9% had some interest in viewing sexual abuse images of children, 6% had some interest in sexual activity with a child, and 4% were sexually attracted to “little children,” fantasized about sex with children and had masturbated to these fantasies.¹³

In a study of 8,718 German men, Dombert found that 5.5% had some sexual interest in children with 4.1% reporting sexual fantasies of prepubescent children.¹⁴ Of those who fantasized about children, Dombert found that 64% reported fantasies about girls, 13.1% were fantasizing about boys, and 18.4% fantasized about both boys and girls.¹⁵ Although the percentage of those fantasizing about boys is lower than those fantasizing about girls, men who sexually abuse boys “show higher pedophilic sexual interest or arousal levels than sexual offenders who exclusively victimize

10. American Psychiatric Association, *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders Fifth Edition* (2013): 698.

11. Sandy K. Wuterle, Dominique A. Simons, Tasha Moreno “Sexual Interest in Children Among an Online Sample of Men and Women: Prevalence and Correlates,” *Sexual abuse: a journal of research and treatment* 26, no.6 (2014): 546, 555. The American Psychiatric Association “Pedophilia per se appears to be a lifelong condition.” *American Psychiatric Association, Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders Fifth Edition* (2013): 699.

12. Wutele, et al, “Sexual Interest in Children.”

13. Wutele, et al, “Sexual Interest in Children.”

14. Beate Dombert, Alexander F. Schmidt, Rainer Banse, Peer Briken, Jurgen Hoyer, Janina Neutze, and Michael Osterheider, “How Common is Males' Self-Reported Sexual Interest in Prepubescent Children?” *Journal of Sex Research* 53, no.2 (2016): 214-223.

15. Dombert, et al, “How Common is Males' Self-Reported Sexual Interest.”

girls.”¹⁶ Those who gravitated toward sexual fantasies involving children “showed significantly higher odds” to engage in sexual behaviors involving children.¹⁷

Although those who sexually fantasize about children are at “higher odds” to commit a crime against a child, not everyone who is sexually attracted to children engages in sexual misconduct with a minor. In the Dombert study, 3.2% of the population studied committed sexual offenses against children, which was slightly less than those reporting sexual fantasies about children (4.2%) or having some level of sexual interest in children (5.5%).¹⁸

In a study of 997 men, 15.3% reported being sexually attracted to a child below the age of 15, 7.9% had fantasized about sexual contact with a child, and 2.9% reported actual sexual contact with “someone younger than the age of consent.”¹⁹

In a study of self-identified pedophiles²⁰ or hebephiles,²¹ approximately half acknowledged sexually abusing a child at least once in their lifetime and 74.5% had engaged in some level of child sexual exploitation such as viewing abusive images of children.²² Moreover, because “it is more likely that a participant would deny sexual contacts with children that actually occurred rather than admit to sexual contacts that had not occurred, a tendency to minimize sexual offense history would be expected.”²³

Commenting on the currently existing research, one scholar concludes “Although there are no currently agreed-upon estimates of the percentage of pedophiles who have committed sexual offenses against a child...we do know that not all pedophiles commit sexual offenses.”²⁴ As a further complicating factor, we

also know that not everyone who sexually abuses a child would meet the diagnostic criteria of a pedophile.²⁵

The percentage of adolescents and teenagers sexually attracted to prepubescent children

Although an awareness of sexual attraction to young children typically begins in adolescence, we do not have any concrete data as to how many adolescents and teenagers are sexually attracted to prepubescent children.²⁶ If, though, it is true that awareness of these attractions begins during adolescence, then the studies done on adults may give insight as to the prevalence of these attractions among older children.

Differences between those who act and do not act on sexual attractions to children

A study by Cohen compared “minor attracted persons” (MAPs) who reported not acting on their sexual attractions to those who had acted on these thoughts.²⁷ Those who acted on their sexual thoughts reported more difficulty in controlling their urges, had a greater history of sexual abuse in their own childhoods, and had “higher levels of antisocial personality traits and nonsexual criminal offenses.”²⁸

Cohen also noted that those who acted on their sexual thoughts toward children were older than those who did not, and thus leaves open the possibility that “younger MAP non-actors may become actors over time.”²⁹ Accordingly, “any possibility of young non-actors eventually acting on their pedophilic attractions underscores the urgent need for improved access to mental health care for the MAP population.”³⁰ Unfortunately, those who had not yet acted on their thoughts “were less likely to seek out mental health care” and this was “of significant concern.”³¹

Mental health care for individuals sexually attracted to children

In a qualitative study of 28 adults, ages 18-30, with a sexual

16. Dombert, et al, “How Common is Males’ Self-Reported Sexual Interest.” A.F. Schmidt, et al, “Direct and Indirect Measures of Sexual Maturity Preferences Differentiate Subtypes of Child Sexual Abusers,” *Sexual Abuse: A Journal of Research & Treatment* 26 (2014): 107-128.

17. Dombert, et al, “How Common is Males’ Self-Reported Sexual Interest.”

18. Dombert, et al, “How Common is Males’ Self-Reported Sexual Interest.”

19. Caoilte O Ciarcha, Gaye Ildeniz’, and Nilda Karoglu, “The Prevalence of Sexual Interest in Children and Sexually Harmful Behavior Self-Reported by Men Recruited Through and Online Crowdsourcing Platform,” *Sexual Abuse* (2021): 1-20.

20. In this study, pedophilia was diagnosed “if, over a period of at least 6 months, the respondent reported recurrent and intense sexual thoughts, fantasies, or urges involving prepubescent children as well as clinically significant distress or impairment as a result of their sexual interest in children.” M. Beier, et al, “Encouraging Self-Identified Pedophiles and Hebephiles to Seek Professional Help: First Results of the Prevention Project Dunkelfeld (PPD),” *Child Abuse & Neglect* 33 (2009): 545-549.

21. Hebephilia was diagnosed “if the interviewee reported that pubescent children rather than prepubescent children were the focus of sexual thoughts, fantasies, or urges, in addition to clinically significant distress or impairment as a result.” M. Beier, et al, “Encouraging Self-Identified Pedophiles and Hebephiles to Seek Professional Help.”

22. M. Beier, et al, “Encouraging Self-Identified Pedophiles and Hebephiles to Seek Professional Help.”

23. M. Beier, et al, “Encouraging Self-Identified Pedophiles and Hebephiles to Seek Professional Help.”

24. Walker, *A Long, Dark Shadow*, 4.

25. See generally, Kenneth V. Lanning, “Acquaintance Child Molesters: A Behavioral Analysis,” in Sharon W. Cooper, Richard J. Estes, Angelo P. Giardino, Nancy D. Kellogg, and Victor I. Vieth, *Medical, Legal, & Social Science Aspects of Child Sexual Exploitation: A Comprehensive Review of Pornography, Prostitution and Internet Crimes*, (2005): 279.

26. Shields, et al, “Help Wanted,” 1-2. (“To our knowledge, there are no estimates of the proportion of adolescents with a sexual interest in prepubescent children.”)

27. Lisa Cohen, et al, “Comparison of Self-Identified Minor-Attracted Persons who Have and Have not Successfully Refrained from Sexual Activity with Children,” *Journal of Sex & Marital Therapy* 44, no. 3(2018):217.

28. Cohen, et al, “Comparison of Self-Identified Minor-Attracted Persons,” 226.

29. Cohen et al, “Comparison of Self-Identified Minor-Attracted Persons,” 226.

30. Cohen et al, “Comparison of Self-Identified Minor-Attracted Persons,” 226.

31. Cohen et al, “Comparison of Self-Identified Minor-Attracted Persons,” 226.

attraction to children, nearly half said that negative feelings about their attraction resulted in mental health conditions including anxiety and depression.³² In some cases, this led to feelings of suicide. One participant in the study said, “Actually the first time I was really going to tell my mother I was about to buy a handgun...I was ready to basically die at that point if she didn’t take it well. I had a total mental breakdown.”³³

Although mental health professionals can assist with feelings of anxiety, isolation, depression and suicidal thoughts, there is no “cure” that will remove a sexual orientation toward children.³⁴ Simply stated, removing sexual impulses toward children “has proven to be impossible according to current scientific knowledge.”³⁵ As a result, the goal of treatment providers is to “provide assistance in mastering and controlling one’s sexual impulses toward children.”³⁶ Since these impulses pose “an increased risk of sexual victimization of children,” detecting and addressing these impulses “at the earliest possible time” is the goal.³⁷

Management of sexual attractions to children

Since management is perhaps the best option to prevent acting on sexual attractions toward children, it is critical to know what may prevent someone from acting on these desires.

In a qualitative study, 31% of adults sexually attracted to children said they refrained from acting on these thoughts by keeping in mind their desire not to hurt anyone and another 24% said “the consequences of acting on their sexual attraction served as a proper deterrent.”³⁸ As one participant noted, “the main motivation for me was knowing that the aftermath would be just completely unpleasant for everybody involved. If there was some way to impart that knowledge to other people before they acted that would be great.”³⁹ Participants in this study also cited three factors that would *increase* the risk of sexually acting out:

- Secrecy surrounding sexual interest in children
- Lack of support for those needing help
- Lack of maturity or understanding about the inability of children to consent⁴⁰

In a study of the potential effectiveness of a helpline for those with sexual attractions to children, researchers found that effective strategies for managing these attractions included identifying one

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or two people who could support the individual.⁴¹ Since “denial and minimization” of the sexual thoughts was a barrier to seeking help, having others hold the individual accountable can aid in prevention.⁴²

Pastoral Care of Adults Sexually Attracted to Children

Although these and other studies may assist a pastor in caring for a person attracted to minors, God’s word is also rich in texts and Bible lessons that may be helpful. The following fifteen recommendations are sensitive to both scripture and the research on this this topic.

Adults with a sexual attraction to children should not participate in youth ministry

Although we don’t know the precise percentage of pedophiles or others with a sexual attraction to children who act out on these impulses, it is common sense to conclude that someone with a sexual attraction to minors is more likely to sexually touch a child than someone who does not have this desire. Since there is presently no cure for pedophilia and management appears to be the best recourse, we should assist those struggling with these thoughts by removing them from youth ministry.

Removing someone from youth ministry should not be seen as a punishment so much as the church acting to keep children as safe as possible and to assist the individual with a sexual attraction in distancing him or herself from temptations. Indeed, many persons committed to not acting out on their sexual thoughts about children self-regulate themselves in this regard. In a qualitative study of 42 adults who reported never acting out on their sexual

32. Shields, et al, “Help Wanted,” 105.

33. Shields, et al, “Help Wanted,” 7.

34. Klaus M. Beier, Ulmut C. Oezdemir, Eliza Schlinizig, Anna Groll, Elena Hupp, Tobias Hellenschmidt, “Just dreaming of them’: The Berlin Project for Primary Prevention of Child Sexual Abuse by Juveniles (PPJ),” *Child Abuse & Neglect* 52 (2016): 1, 9.

35. Beier et al, “Just Dreaming of Them,” 9.

36. Beier et al, “Just Dreaming of Them,” 9.

37. Beier et al, “Just Dreaming of Them,” 9.

38. Shields, et al, “Help Wanted,” 1, 8.

39. Shields, et al, “Help Wanted,” 8.

40. Shields, et al, “Help Wanted,” 8.

41. Joan Van Horn, et al, “Stop it Now! A Pilot Study into the Limits and Benefits of a Free Helpline Preventing Child Sexual Abuse,” *Journal of Child Sexual Abuse* 24 (2015): 853, 865.

42. Van Horn, et al, “Stop it Now!” 863.

thoughts about children, 15 said they avoided being alone with children and some “avoided public places where minors in the age range for which they held attractions were likely to go, including malls, parks, public pools, or playgrounds.”⁴³

Although some may consider removal from youth ministry unfair to pedophiles who have never acted on these thoughts, and may never act on these thoughts, this policy may aid the individual with conflicting, confusing emotions. As one adult sexually attracted to children noted, “I specifically try to avoid boys because of the conflict they cause inside, and it sucks because I really wish I could help these boys somehow!”⁴⁴

Even if a parishioner attracted to minors is at low risk of physically harming a child, the attraction may result in favoring some children over others by giving them extra attention or gifts or otherwise elevating their needs. In one study, 71.6% of adults sexually attracted to children “reported having fallen in love with a child who was 14 or younger when the participants themselves were 18 and older.”⁴⁵ Although this “does not mean romantic attraction to a child necessarily increases risk of sexual offending,”⁴⁶ it is an unhealthy dynamic in which the child is meeting the emotional needs of the adult.

Lastly, children and their parents may feel uncomfortable around a parishioner who may be attracted to one or more children. This may occur particularly if a child or their parents have experienced abuse by another person in another setting. Sensitivity toward child victims and adult survivors is also a legitimate basis for prohibiting an adult sexually attracted to children from participating in youth ministries.

Adolescents and teenagers with a sexual attraction to prepubescent children should not serve in a supervisory role with little children

Assisting adolescents and teens with unwanted sexual thoughts is more challenging. These children need peers and, in nearly all instances, should remain in youth ministries. Indeed, isolation may increase a chance a child will act out inappropriately.⁴⁷ At the same time, they should not be in a supervisory position over prepubescent children. Beyond this, the church should work with the youth, his or her parents, and appropriate professionals in developing a safety plan that serves the interests of all parties.⁴⁸

43. Walker, *A Long, Dark Shadow*, 115.

44. Walker, *A Long, Dark Shadow*, 117.

45. Frederica M. Martijn, Kelly M. Babschishin, Lesleigh E. Pullman, and Michael C. Seto, “Sexual Attraction and Falling in Love in Persons with Pedohebephilia,” *Archives of Sexual Behavior* 49 (2020):1305, 1310.

46. Martijn, et al, “Sexual Attraction,” 1306.

47. Elizabeth J. Letourneau, et al, “The Influence of Sex Offender Registration on Juvenile Sexual Recidivism,” *Criminal Justice Policy Rev.* 20 no. 2 (2009): 136.

48. “Recognizing and Responding to Developmentally Appropriate and Inappropriate Sexual Behaviors of Children: A Primer for Parents, Youth Serving Organizations, Schools, Child Protection Professionals, and Courts,” in R. Geffner, J. White, L.K Hamberger, A. Rosenbaum, V. Vaughan-Eden, V. Vieth, *Handbook of Interpersonal*

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If a youth discloses a struggle with sexual attractions, this may be very difficult to discuss with the child’s parents⁴⁹ and a pastor can help navigate this challenging path.

Congregations can also help adolescents and teenagers struggling with a sexual attraction to young children by creating space where they can seek help. In one study, an adult sexually attracted to children said if “information about where I could talk with someone about this or where I could find help” had been provided in a high school sex education class “I would perhaps have reached out earlier than I did now.”⁵⁰

Assist in finding appropriate mental health care

Although there is no cure for those sexually attracted to children, mental health care can aid in coping with feelings of isolation, depression, anxiety and other conditions associated with this attraction. In addition to these challenges, men sexually attracted to children have often experienced multiple forms of childhood trauma or other adverse childhood experiences (ACEs). An ACE score can be anywhere from 0 to 10 depending on how many different categories of trauma or other adverse childhood experiences an individual fits into.⁵¹ Researchers have found that 52% of men sexually attracted to minors had an ACE score of 4 or higher whereas only 9% of the general population has an

Violence Across the Lifespan (Springer, 2021).

49. While many minor attracted persons (MAPs) are able to find support, one-third of the MAPs in Walker’s study faced rejection with some “being cast out of homes and families.” Walker, *A Long, Dark Shadow*, 76.

50. Jill S. Levenson and Melissa D. Grady, “Preventing Sexual Abuse: Perspectives of Minor-Attracted Persons About Seeking Help,” *Sexual Abuse* 31 no. 8 (2018): 991, 1000.

51. For an overview of Adverse Childhood Experience research, see Vincent J. Filetti & Robert F. Anda, “The Relationship of Adverse Childhood Experiences to Adult Medical Disease, Psychiatric Disorders, and Sexual Behavior: Implications for Healthcare,” *Impact of Early Life Trauma on Health and Disease: The Hidden Epidemic*, Ruth A. Lanius et al., eds., Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010, 77-87.

ACE score this high.⁵² When this is the case, one focus of therapy “should be on their trauma histories and related psychosocial needs rather than exclusive emphasis on the minor-attraction.”⁵³

Despite the need, it can be challenging to find appropriate mental health care for someone attracted to minors. In one study, 75% of adults sexually attracted to children had sought “some sort of mental health” care but only 49% found it “helpful or very helpful.”⁵⁴

Research indicates that many mental health professionals are poorly trained to respond to issues of child abuse even when working with survivors,⁵⁵ and thus likely have even less training on working with a specialized topic such as sexual attraction to minors.⁵⁶ Accordingly, a congregation can aid in finding someone comfortable with and able to work with this population. The Association of the Treatment of Sexual Abusers, among other resources,⁵⁷ may aid in finding a properly qualified clinician. Given the potential importance of mental health to someone struggling with an attraction to children, the congregation should explore whether or not it can help in funding this care.⁵⁸

Coordinate spiritual care with mental health care

Very few pastors have received any training on working with a parishioner struggling with a sexual attraction to children. Accordingly, it is important for the pastor to ask, if not require the parishioner to sign a release so that the clergy can coordinate spiritual care with mental health care.⁵⁹ In this way, the pastor will not unwittingly undermine the work being done in a mental health setting and the mental health provider will gain a deeper appreciation of the spiritual care being provided to the parishioner.

Affirm God’s instructions for protecting children

In Walker’s interviews with adults sexually attracted to children, some contended that “religious convictions were a key motivation” for “not offending.”⁶⁰ One individual noted that acting on his

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sexual attraction to children would be an “act against God.”⁶¹ Although this is anecdotal, it provides some evidence that a belief in God prohibits child sexual abuse and may keep some from acting out on their thoughts. If so, these teachings should be nourished.

In Christian terms, these interviewees are articulating doctrines buttressed by the life and words of Jesus. According to the Gospels, Christ was the descendant of at least three sexually exploited women and narrowly survived infanticide. He grew to be a prominent defender of children who strongly condemned anyone who hurt a child (Matt 18:6-9; Luke 17:1-2; Mark 9:42). Indeed, Jesus went so far as to say our treatment of children reflects what we really believe about God (Mark 9:36-37).⁶²

In working with someone struggling with a sexual attraction to children, these words of Christ should not be used only as a reminder that God views harshly those who harm children, but also a reminder of God’s delight in those who refrain from causing harm. Accordingly, every time the parishioner flees a thought of sexually touching a child, he or she serves “the least of these” and thus is also serving Jesus (Matt 25:40). Through prayer and encouragement, these victories can be celebrated during pastoral care—as they will one day be celebrated in heaven.

Remind the parishioner of God’s willingness and ability to help

Some adults sexually attracted to children report finding comfort in the belief that God was willing to help them. According to one such person, “I’m religious so I felt like God was like ‘It’s okay, you can do this, I’ll take care of you...’. So I feel like that’s the only thing that pulled me through.”⁶³ While this again is only anecdotal evidence, it suggests some potential value in reminding a recipient of pastoral care of God’s many promises to help us overcome our temptations and to comfort us in our struggles (e.g., Heb 2:14-18; Phil 4:13).

52. Melissa D. Grady & Jill S. Levenson, “Prevalence Rates of Adverse Childhood Experiences in a Sample of Minor-Attracted Persons: A Comparison Study,” *Traumatology* 27no. 2 (2021): 227, 231.

53. Grady & Levenson, “Prevalence Rates,” 231.

54. Grady & Levenson, “Prevalence Rates,” 999.

55. Kelly M. Champion, et al, “Child Maltreatment Training in Doctoral Programs in Clinical, Counseling, and School Psychology: Where Do We Go from Here?,” *Child Maltreatment* 8 (2003): 211.

56. Walker, *A Long, Dark Shadow*, 132-133.

57. Additional resources include the Safer Society Foundation (<https://safersocietypress.org/treatment-referrals/>) and the Blue Rock Institute (<https://www.bluerock.info/>).

58. In one study, many persons attracted to minors said that “therapy was financially out of reach.” Jill S. Levenson & Melissa D. Grady, “Preventing Sexual Abuse: Perspectives of Minor-Attracted Persons About Seeking Help,” *Sexual Abuse* 31 no. 8 (2019): 991, 1002.

59. Cory Jewell Jensen, “Understanding and Working with Adult Sex Offenders in the Church,” *Currents in Theology & Mission* 45 no. 3(2018): 36, 37; Kevin F. Mutter, “Confronting Abuse: Fostering a Sense of Healthy Responsibility in the Abuser,” Andrew J. Schmutzer, ed, *The Long Journey Home: Understanding and Ministering to the Sexually Abused* (2011), 262, 266.

60. Walker, *A Long, Dark Shadow*, 112.

61. Walker, *A Long, Dark Shadow*, 112.

62. See generally Victor I. Vieth, *On This Rock: A Call to Center the Christian Response to Child Abuse on the Life and Words of Jesus*, (2018).

63. Walker, *A Long, Dark Shadow*, 96.

Extend meaningful, not cheap grace

According to the Apostle Paul, all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God (Rom 3.23). In Walker’s study, some of those interviewed noted that since Christians believe everyone is sinful, they are welcoming of a person struggling with sexual thoughts about children.⁶⁴ One person in the study noted that while his Christianity made him feel guilty about his sexual attraction to children, this guilt “also made him feel connected to others in the church.”⁶⁵

In addition to believing that all have sinned and thus everyone is in the same boat, Paul also believed that God’s grace covered everyone—including himself who he called “the worst of sinners” (1 Tim 1:5). Although these twin doctrines of universal sin and grace can be comforting to anyone feeling guilt over their sins, this concept cannot be used as a license to sin (Rom 6:1-4).

In the history of the Christian church, clergy and congregants have extended what Dietrich Bonhoeffer termed “cheap grace”⁶⁶ to those who harmed children. Without demanding repentance, Christians have allowed offenders to continue abusing children without any real accountability.⁶⁷ As a result, we have crushed victims, emboldened offenders to continue their crimes, and caused many to flee the church.⁶⁸

In working with a parishioner sexually attracted to children, we must make it clear that if he or she sexually abused a child or possessed images of children being sexually abused, they must turn themselves into the police and otherwise accept responsibility for their crimes.⁶⁹ The pastor can assist the parishioner in making the call to the authorities but, if the parishioner is unwilling to do this, the pastor must contact the authorities and otherwise comply with mandated reporting laws (Rom 13:1-2). There were two thieves on the cross and the one who accepted earthly consequences for his offenses is the one who received the mercy of God (Luke 23:43).

Strong messaging that a congregation will not tolerate crimes against children may aid some who are sexually attracted to children from acting on these desires. In one study, more than one-third of the participants sexually attracted to children said that a fear of arrest or prison “was substantial enough that it prevented

In addition to believing that all have sinned and thus everyone is in the same boat, Paul also believed that God’s grace covered everyone—including himself who he called “the worst of sinners” (1 Tim 1:5).

them from sexual offending.”⁷⁰

Confront any cognitive distortion that children can consent to sex with an adult

In one study, minor attracted persons (MAPs) fit into two groups, with one group labeled “anti-contact” and the other “pro-choice.” The anti-contact MAPS believe that “sexual contact between adults and minors would cause harm in and of itself.”⁷¹ However, the pro-choice group “believed some minors have the emotional capacity to consent to sex with adults, lacking only the legal capacity to do so as a result of the current social climate.”⁷² The pro-choice individuals “provided multiple explanations for their reasoning, often based in academic discourse” such as referencing “points in world history when sexual activity between adults and children was tolerated, accepted, or regarded as mutually beneficial.”⁷³

The belief that children can consent to sexual activity with an adult is nothing new. At one point, there was a “scholarly” journal called “Paidika: The Journal of Paedophilia” which published works asserting sexual activity with children is not necessarily harmful.⁷⁴ In a 1993 issue of the Journal, Dr. Ralph Underwager, who received a PhD from the University of Minnesota and his Master of Divinity from Concordia Seminary in St. Louis, gave an interview in which he said:

Paedophiles can boldly and courageously affirm what they choose. They can say that what they want is to find the best way to love. I am also a theologian and as a theologian I believe it is God’s will that there be closeness and intimacy, unity of the flesh, between people. A Paedophile can say “This closeness is possible for me within the choices that I’ve made.”⁷⁵

Thinking such as this is dangerous in that it reduces the

64. Walker, *A Long, Dark Shadow*, 97.

65. Walker, *A Long, Dark Shadow*, 97.

66. “Cheap grace is the preaching of forgiveness without repentance, baptism without church discipline, Communion without confession, absolution without personal confession. Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ, living and incarnate.” Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*, (1959), 44-45.

67. For a discussion of proper application of law and gospel to offenders, see Victor I. Vieth, “What Would Walther Do? Applying Law & Gospel to Victims and Perpetrators of Child Sexual Abuse,” *Journal of Psychology & Theology* 40 no. 4 (2012): 257.

68. Kate Shellnut, “1 in 10 Protestants Have Left a Church Over Abuse,” *Christianity Today*, May 21, 2019, available online at: www.christianitytoday.com/news/2019/may/lifeway-protestant-abuse-survey-young-christians-leave-chur.html (last visited August 26, 2021).

69. Vieth, “What Would Walther Do?” 257, 270-273.

70. Walker, *A Long Dark Shadow*, 110.

71. Walker, *A Long Dark Shadow*, 106.

72. Walker, *A Long Dark Shadow*, 106.

73. Walker, *A Long Dark Shadow*, 106.

74. The journal was “dedicated to the study of pedophilia from a favorable and normalization point of view.” Wikipedia entry at: https://eo.wikipedia.org/wiki/Paidika:_The_Journal_of_Paedophilia (last visited August 25, 2021).

75. “Interview: Holida Wakefield and Ralph Underwager,” *Paidika: Journal of Paedophilia* 3 no. 1(1993): 4.

barriers to acting out sexually with a child. If a MAP entertains the notion that “some” children could consent if only the culture would allow it, then there is a risk the MAP will find the child and culture he believes fits into his or her cognitive distortion. When this happens, the risk of sexual assault is very real.

When the Christian church encounters thinking of this kind, pastors and other leaders may wish to point out that Jesus was born into a world in which many believed that the sexual exploitation of children was not harmful or, even if it was, it didn’t matter because of the low status of children.⁷⁶ “Contrary to the ethos of his time,” writes one scholar, “Jesus didn’t view children as objects; he believed that anyone who was human couldn’t be alien to God, that all were part of God’s kingdom.”⁷⁷

In each of the Synoptic Gospels, Jesus issues a harsh warning against anyone who harms a child (Matt 18:6-9; Luke 17:1-2; Mark 9:42). Specifically, Jesus says “If any of you put a stumbling block before one of these little ones who believe in me, it would be better for you if a great millstone were hung around your neck and you were thrown into the sea” (Mark 9:42). According to some scholars, Jesus may specifically be condemning the sin of sexual abuse.⁷⁸ However, even scholars with a broader interpretation of the passage read it as an unequivocal condemnation of child maltreatment. Professor John Schuetze writes:

Child abuse causes children to stumble in the faith in many ways. Later in life it can trigger sinful behavior to cope with the painful memories. It often confuses the person spiritually and theologically: ‘If there is a God, why didn’t [God] help me? If God promises to answer our prayers, then why didn’t [God] stop my abuser? I prayed about it many times.’⁷⁹

From this Schuetze concludes, “Jesus recognized children were valuable and vulnerable” and that for this very reason Christ issues the “strong warning” contained in the Synoptic Gospels.⁸⁰

If it is true that Jesus rejected the widespread sexual abuse of the era in which he walked the earth, then this history should be used in helping MAPs reject the cognitive distortion of the value in returning to the “good old days.”

Encourage those who believe they are standing firm

76. Victor I. Vieth, *On this Rock: A Call to Center the Christian Response to Child Abuse on the Life and Words of Jesus*, (2018), 12-16; O.M. Bakke, *When Children Became People: The Birth of Childhood in Early Christianity*, (2005), 34.

77. Paul Offit, *Bad Faith* (2015), 126.

78. See Horsley’s commentary on Mark in the *New Annotated Oxford Bible*, 1809n. This conclusion is based on this verse combined with subsequent verses pertaining to sins committed by various parts of the body and the Oxford Bible commentators’ review of “references in rabbinic literature. *New Annotated Oxford Bible*, 1809n. See also, William Loader, *Sexuality and the Jesus Tradition*, (2005), 20-24; dela Yarbrow Collins, *Mark: A Commentary*, (2007), 450.

79. John D. Schuetze, “Pastoral Theology Brief: Matthew 18 Also Includes Verse 6,” *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly* 112 (2012), 224, 228.

80. Schuetze, “Pastoral Theology Brief,” 224, 228.

In each of the Synoptic Gospels, Jesus issues a harsh warning against anyone who harms a child.

to be careful not to fall

In qualitative studies, some persons attracted to children are adamant they will never abuse a child. Walker’s research, for example, references a person who describes himself as a “celibate pedophile” and who was “emphatic” that anyone who sexually abuses a child is “pure evil.”⁸¹ At the same time, some of the interviewees justified their fantasies about children with one individual saying “I have self-control and I will and I can have a private sexual fantasy [or] erotic attraction, and that doesn’t mean I’m going to have a behavior, so, for me, it’s very clear.”⁸²

Although it is commendable that there are persons sexually attracted to children who recognize the wrongfulness of acting on these desires, a pastor must challenge the utility of entertaining a fantasy about sexually abusing a child. It is doubtful that such fantasies involve violent rape, but rather thoughts of a child enjoying the sexual activity. If fantasies such as this are entertained, particularly if they are directed at a child the fantasizer has access to, it may eventually lower the inhibitions or guard of those who contend they currently have clear boundaries. At the very least, this should be a conversation in pastoral care with the vigilant reminder that the notion a child could consent to or find pleasure in sexual abuse is nothing more than a fantasy. In the real world, child sexual abuse impacts a child physically, emotionally, and spiritually and these wounds can last a lifetime.⁸³

There is also a biblical admonition from the Apostle Paul that may be helpful for those who are certain they would never cross a line in real life, even though they may regularly cross this line in their fantasies. “So if you think you are standing firm,” Paul warns, “be careful that you don’t fall! No temptation has seized you yet except what is common to man. And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can stand up under it” (1 Cor 10:12-13).

There are at least two lessons in Paul’s words that may be helpful in pastoral care. First, we are at greatest danger of giving in to a temptation when we are certain we would never fall. In Christian theology this is partly because we are relying on our own

81. Walker, *A Long Dark Shadow*, 104.

82. Walker, *A Long Dark Shadow*, 105.

83. Vincent J. Filetti and Robert F. Anda, “The Relationship of Adverse Childhood Experiences to Adult Medical Disease, Psychiatric Disorders, and Sexual Behavior: Implications for Healthcare” in Ruth A. Lanius, et al, eds., *Impact of Early Life Trauma on Health and Disease: The Hidden Epidemic*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010, 77-87; Bessel Van Der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma*, (2014).

Yes, an unwanted thought may come into our mind, but what we do with that thought is our own decision. Do we nurse the thought in our mind and expand upon it? Do we fixate on a particular child when we see them in church or another public setting?

strength and not God. In secular terms, this means that we have let our guard down and thus are vulnerable to falling.

Second, Paul's language about God giving us an out when temptations come may open up a conversation in pastoral care about the options available to a parishioner to resist unwelcome thoughts about sexually touching children. From these options can come a safety plan the church can work with the parishioner in implementing.

Prevent an unwanted sexual thought from becoming a wanted thought

In the literature, sexual thoughts about children are often described as "unwanted" with one study referring to them as an "unwanted affliction."⁸⁴ Although this terminology may be accurate for many with sexual thoughts about children, it should not lead to the conclusion that all sexual thoughts are unwanted or that even an unwanted sexual thought could not turn into a wanted thought.

To understand this better, a theological construct may be helpful. On the subject of temptation, Martin Luther offered these thoughts:

No one may be exempt from temptation. But we can certainly defend ourselves and relieve all temptations by praying for and imploring the help of God. In the book of the old fathers of the church we read that a young brother wanted to be rid of his evil thoughts. The old father said: Dear brother, you cannot prevent the birds from flying in the air over your head, but you can certainly prevent them from building a nest in your hair. Likewise, St. Augustine says, we cannot prevent offenses and temptations from coming upon us; but by prayer and the invocation of divine assistance we may certainly defend ourselves and keep them from overcoming us.⁸⁵

This may be a helpful construct in working with a pedophile or someone else with sexual thoughts about children. Yes, an unwanted thought may come into our mind, but what we do with that thought is our own decision. Do we nurse the thought in our

mind and expand upon it? Do we fixate on a particular child when we see them in church or another public setting? Do we actively fantasize about a particular child and perhaps masturbate to this fantasy? Do we access sexual images of children and get aroused and try to convince ourselves they are not really being abused in the film? Do we tell ourselves that computer-generated images of children being sexually assaulted will not in any way lower our inhibitions in acting on these desires?

Simply stated, there is a point in time where every unwanted thought becomes wanted and it would be appropriate to discuss this in pastoral care and to develop a game plan tailored to each person that will assist him or her in preventing a bird from nesting in their hair.

Develop service opportunities that are as safe as possible

Although a parishioner with a sexual attraction to children should not serve in youth ministry, this doesn't mean there are no opportunities for service in the church. There may be various committees, Bible studies or other activities that do not involve work with children which may provide great meaning and create a sense of community.

This may also expand the network the MAP can draw upon to assist in coping with various struggles he or she may be having including sexual thoughts about children. In one study, nearly one-fifth of persons attracted to minors said that support from persons not attracted to children "helped them abstain from offending" by simply being with them while in the presence of a child.⁸⁶

Help the parishioner avoid negative coping behaviors

Without a healthy outlet or mature support, a person attracted to children may turn to chemicals or viewing actual or computer-generated images of children being sexually abused. These unhealthy, even criminal coping behaviors are explored below.

1. Alcohol and drugs

In a qualitative study of 42 persons sexually attracted to children, 11 said they were now or had in the past used drugs or alcohol to cope.⁸⁷ In addition to the physical and emotional harm of chemicals, they can increase the risk of abuse. Alcohol, for instance, may lower inhibitions and be used to justify a sexual assault of a child.⁸⁸ To reduce this risk, and to help the parishioner physically and emotionally, the church can aid in accessing quality chemical dependency treatment or other services, if relevant. If the parishioner is in need of these services and cannot afford these services, the church should consider helping financially.

2. Sexually exploitive images of children

We know from research that a "self-reported interest in having sex with a child" has a "strong association with self-reported child

84. Shields, et al, "Help Wanted," 1, 8.

85. Ewald M. Plass, *What Luther Says*, 1344.

86. Walker, *A Long, Dark Shadow*, 119.

87. Walker, *A Long, Dark Shadow*, 86-88.

88. Walker, *A Long, Dark Shadow*, 100.

pornography viewing.⁸⁹ This is deeply troubling on several fronts.

First, films or other images of children being sexually abused depict criminal acts and the possession of these images is itself a criminal act which provides financial support for an industry that profits from the abuse of children. For many of the victims in these films, they continue to be exploited every time someone views the films for his or her own sexual arousal. As one federal court concluded:

The victimization of the children involved does not end when the pornographer's camera is put away... 'The pornography's continued existence causes the child victims continuing harm by haunting those children in future years.'⁹⁰

Second, although not all users of sexually exploitive images of children commit hands-on sexual offenses against children,⁹¹ it is both a strong indicator of pedophilia⁹² and a risk factor for contact sexual offenses.⁹³ In a 2000 analysis from the Federal Bureau of Prisons, "76% of offenders convicted of internet-related crimes against children admitted to contact sex crimes with children previously undetected by law enforcement and had an average of 30.5 child sex victims each."⁹⁴

Third, sexually exploitive images of children are often used in the grooming of child victims. Simply stated, these images are "used to lower the natural, innate resistance of children to performing sexual acts, thus functioning as a primer for child sexual abuse."⁹⁵ In an analysis of 1,400 cases of child sexual abuse,

89. Michael C. Seto, et al, "Viewing Child Pornography: Prevalence and Correlates in a Representative Community Sample of Young Swedish Men," *Arch. Sexual Behavior* 44 (2015): 67, 77.

90. United States v. Norris, 159 F.3d 926 (5th Cir. 1998), quoting Osborne v. Ohio, 495 U.S. 103 (1990).

91. In a study of 201 men on the Canadian Sex Offender registry identified as child pornography offenders, 24% had a prior contact sexual offense and 15% had a prior offense involving child sexual abuse images. Within 2.5 years after their release, 4% of the population studied had committed a sexual contact offense, and these offenders were primarily concentrated among those with prior sexual assaults on their record. Although acknowledging a longer follow up period might increase the percentage of child sexual assaults resulting in charges, the researchers said their findings "contradict the assumption that all child pornography offenders are at very high risk to commit contact sexual offenses involving children." Michael C. Seto & Angela W. Eke, "The Criminal Histories and Later Offending of Child Pornography Offenders," *Sexual Abuse: A Journal of Research and Treatment* (2005), 201, 208.

92. Michael C. Seto, et al, "Child Pornography Offenses are a Valid Diagnostic Indicator of Pedophilia," *Journal of Abnormal Psychology* 115 no. 3: 610.

93. Candice Kim, "From Fantasy to Reality: The Link Between Viewing Child Pornography and Molesting Children," *Child Sexual Exploitation Update* 1 no.3 (2004).

94. Kim, "From Fantasy to Reality," citing "Internet Child Pornography: Before the House Subcommittee on Crime, Terrorism, and Homeland Security, Committee on the Judiciary, 107th Congress" (2002) (statement of Michael J. Heimback, "Crimes Against Children Unit," Criminal Investigative Division, FBI).

95. Bruce Watson & Shyla R. LeFever, "Understanding the Impact of Pornography on Adults and Children," in Sharon W. Cooper, et

Even if a viewer of sexually exploitive images of children does not groom a child with these images or does not commit any sort of contact offense, the cognitive distortions of these offenders need to be addressed with them.

more than half of the cases involved the use of sexually exploitive images of children.⁹⁶

Fourth, even if a viewer of sexually exploitive images of children does not groom a child with these images or does not commit any sort of contact offense, the cognitive distortions of these offenders need to be addressed with them. Consider, for instance, this rationale provided by a consumer of this material:

I would never have allowed myself to fantasize about a boy in real life, I would never fantasize about them because it feels too close to home. It feels too real, or too risky that I might act on it if I fantasize about it... I would never, like, see a boy at a park and then like fantasize about that boy. Like, never. I've always drawn that line where that wasn't allowed. So instead, I would look at pornography. And pornography, at least, I'll get that fix, so you know, that release. And, not feel the guilt. The guilt of wrecking someone in real life.⁹⁷

Any professional working with this offender needs to assist him in realizing that the child in the film is, in fact, a human being and that he is, in fact, "wrecking someone in real life." Simply stated, this individual is lying to himself—and this lie is hurting both the child and the offender.

Given these and other risks, a pastoral care worker should explore with the parishioner any temptations to view images of children being sexually abused and take all necessary precautions to avoid falling prey to this temptation. This may include confronting any cognitive distortions used to justify such behavior as well as regulating computer usage and having an accountability partner periodically check the parishioner's technology to ensure crimes are not being committed. If, at any point, it comes to the attention of a pastor or other member of the church that crimes are being committed, a report to the authorities should be immediately made.

al, eds, *Medical, Legal, & Social Science Aspects of Child Sexual Exploitation: A Comprehensive Review of Pornography, Prostitution, and Internet Crimes*, Volume One (2005), 193, 198.

96. Kim, "From Fantasy to Reality," citing the statement of John B. Rabun, Deputy Director of the National Center for Missing & Exploited Children, before the Senate Subcommittee on Juvenile Justice, 94th Congress (1984).

97. Walker, *A Long, Dark Shadow*, 125.

3. *Simulated images of children being sexually abused*

Some pedophiles or others sexually attracted to children use sexually exploitive images that are drawn, computer-generated, or that otherwise does not involve real children.⁹⁸ Although some scholars believe that legalizing these materials “would create a sexual outlet for people with no other nonharmful options,”⁹⁹ there are three significant concerns with this suggestion.

First, while these depictions may not involve real children, some offenders use them in the grooming of child abuse victims.¹⁰⁰ As noted in one peer-reviewed analysis, since children cannot “distinguish between ‘real’ and ‘synthetic’ images, computer-generated images are just as effective as true pictures for luring children into sexual activities.”¹⁰¹ Even if a user of these materials does not actively use them in the abuse of a child, the user is nonetheless supporting an industry profiting from materials that legitimize abuse and are used by some in the actual abuse of children.¹⁰²

Second, it is speculative to assume that viewing simulated images of children being sexually abused will deter a pedophile from acting on these fantasies. Although there are pedophiles who contend these materials prevent them from abusing children, there are also pedophiles who “acknowledge that exposure to child abuse images fuels their fantasies and plays an important part in leading them to commit hands-on sexual offenses against children.”¹⁰³

Third, viewing simulated images of child sexual abuse runs counter to the teachings of Jesus and thus would not be a permissible option for working with a pedophile in the church. Jesus had strong warnings about the dangers of sinful thoughts, going so far as to say that harboring hateful thoughts is akin to murder (Matt 5:21-22) and lusting after anyone who is not our spouse is the same as having committed the act of adultery (Matt 5:27). Accordingly, it would be theologically problematic for any Christian to assert Jesus would be okay with lustful gazing of even a simulated image of a child being sexually violated. This is particularly so given Christ’s strong admonition not to hurt children (Mark 9:42) and the fact that Jesus himself was stripped of his clothing and publicly exposed—a form of sexual humiliation that was part of the torture he experienced.¹⁰⁴

98. Walker, *A Long, Dark Shadow*, 127-128.

99. Walker, *A Long, Dark Shadow*, 128.

100. Bruce Watson & Shyla R. LeFever, “Understanding the Impact of Pornography on Adults and Children,” in Sharon W. Cooper, et al., eds., *Medical, Legal, & Social Science Aspects of Child Sexual Exploitation: A Comprehensive Review of Pornography, Prostitution, and Internet Crimes, Volume One*, (2005), 193, 199.

101. Watson & LeFever, “Understanding the Impact of Pornography,” 193, 199.

102. Walker, *A Long, Dark Shadow*, 127-128. Even in this study, however, one participant felt that simulated images “had an effect on his attractions, noting he thought they increased them.”

103. John Carr, *Child Abuse, Child Pornography and the Internet: Executive Summary* (NCH 2004).

104. “Crucifixion in the ancient world appears to have carried a strongly sexual element and should be understood as a form of sexual abuse that involved sexual humiliation and sometimes sexual assault.

The Apostle Paul ... proposed action in response to sinful thoughts, writing that Christians should set their minds “on things above” and put aside “whatever belongs to your earthly nature” (Colo 3:2-5).

It is important to note, though, that Jesus did not simply instruct his followers that sinful thoughts run counter to the commands of God, he told us to take action when we are having these feelings. With respect to those filled with anger or hate, he told them to go and “be reconciled to your brother” before giving a gift on the altar (Matt 5:23-24). With respect to those struggling with sinful sexual thoughts, Jesus told his followers to take extreme measures, if necessary, including gouging out an eye or cutting off a hand rather than using it in a sexual offense (Matt 5:27-30). Applying this lesson to someone tempted to view simulated images of children being sexually abused, it may be necessary to remove a computer from the household or otherwise have restrictions on accessing media, and to have an accountability partner or a confessor who will help in refraining from this activity.

The Apostle Paul likewise proposed action in response to sinful thoughts, writing that Christians should set their minds “on things above” and put aside “whatever belongs to your earthly nature” (Colo 3:2-5). Instead, Christians should think of “whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things” (Phil 4:7). Although it is likely impossible to prevent a stray thought from entering the mind of someone sexually attracted to children, it may be possible to discipline him or herself to recognize the thought as concerning and to choose not to nurse the thought. If need be, we can reach out to a trusted colleague to aid us in controlling troubling thoughts, and perhaps replace them with something praiseworthy.

If the parishioner is accessing online groups of adults sexually attracted to children, discuss the potential risks as well as the potential benefits of these communities

Crucifixion was intended to be more than the ending of life; prior to actual death it sought to reduce the victim to something less than human in the eyes of society. Victims were crucified naked in what amounted to a ritualized form of public sexual humiliation.” David Tombs, “Crucifixion and Sexual Abuse” in James R. Reaves, David Tombs & Rocío Figueroa, *When Did We See You Naked? Jesus as a Victim of Sexual Abuse* (2021), 15, 18.

One study found that 47% of adults sexually attracted to children visited websites or internet forums where they dialogue with and seek support from others with similar attractions.¹⁰⁵ There are reputable institutions and nationally recognized child abuse experts who believe there is merit in helping minor attracted persons access online forums such as these.¹⁰⁶ There is also anecdotal evidence that these communities may assist some persons with these struggles. One person attracted to minors states:

And at the foundation of my theology is the need for humans to be a part of a greater body. And to be connected to something greater than themselves. And I think that part of why this transition to not being in denial has been a little bit easier than one would think is because of the VirPed [Virtuous Pedophile] community, because if I tried to be—I don't know—if I had decided to be honest with myself before I had joined that community, I think it would have been a lot harder.

At the same time, there is anecdotal evidence these sites are not welcoming, and may even be harmful for some with attractions to children. One qualitative study noted there were some persons attracted to minors who “didn't find sites like VirPed and B4U-Act to be a welcoming space.”¹⁰⁷ For example, some minor attracted persons faced hostility from others in these sites if they disclosed an attraction to particularly young children.¹⁰⁸

In working with a parishioner visiting these sites, it is wise to ask why the person is visiting these sites and explore whether any benefits from these forums can be achieved in another, perhaps less risky setting. If, for instance, there is simply a desire for community, perhaps the pastor and others in the church can fulfill that need. It is also wise to explore in pastoral care what sorts of messages are being given to the parishioner and to discuss whether or not these messages are truly helpful. If, for instance, the parishioner is being told (or believes they are being told) it is appropriate to be with children the parishioner is attracted to, but there is every reason to believe this is not a safe option, the pastor needs to intervene and give a more appropriate message.

There is also a question of whether or not a particular forum conflicts with the religious beliefs of the parishioner. For example, Virtuous Pedophile “takes a solid stance about sexual activity between adults and children, stating it is fundamentally wrong.”¹⁰⁹ However, B4U-Act “has declined to take a moral stance on the

issue, instead choosing to focus on creating a dialogue between those with varying moral opinions.”¹¹⁰ For most Christians, touching a child sexually is fundamentally and unequivocally at odds with the teachings of Christ.¹¹¹ Accordingly, sending a parishioner to a forum which believes there is room to debate the morality of this conduct may not only be culturally insensitive, it may reduce or eliminate a critical barrier that keeps a person sexually attracted to minors from abusing a child.

Working with persons attracted to both children and adults

Studies find that approximately 42% of persons attracted to minors “report a primary attraction to prepubescent” children and that “individuals attracted to male minors endorsed less sexual interest in adult partners than those attracted to females.”¹¹² Nonetheless, there are persons sexually attracted to children who are also attracted to adults.

When this occurs, there may be a healthy sexual outlet for the individual the pastor and other professionals may be working with. However, when a minor attracted person is dating, married, or otherwise in a relationship with an adult who has children of their own, has nieces or nephews, or perhaps works with children, it is important to discuss potential risks and, if need be, develop an appropriate safety plan.

Confidentiality, child safety, and the duty to warn

Perhaps the greatest challenge in providing pastoral care to persons sexually attracted to children is creating an opening where a person attracted to minors feels safe in speaking to a minister. There is a significant stigma attached to this attraction and the person struggling with these thoughts is understandably afraid of seeking help. Will they lose their friends? Their job? Will they be reported to the police? Will they be harassed or bullied?

We do, though, want those with a sexual attraction to children to seek help with their struggles and this can only happen if we discuss this forthrightly—and let those who choose to seek help know what the church can and cannot do.

First, we need to inform those struggling with sexual thoughts about children that there are limits to confidentiality. If someone discloses sexually abusing a child or viewing images of children being abused, the church will comply with the law and make a report to the authorities. Civil law and, more importantly, God's law require this.¹¹³ According to the Prophet Ezekiel, God holds

105. Jill S. Levenson and Melissa D. Grady, “Preventing Sexual Abuse: Perspectives of Minor-Attracted Persons About Seeking Help,” *Sexual Abuse* 31 no. 8 (2018): 991.

106. For instance, the John Hopkins Bloomberg School for Public Health lists Virtuous Pedophile and B4Uact as resources for those struggling with a sexual attraction to children. www.jhsph.edu/research/centers-and-institutes/moore-center-for-the-prevention-of-child-sexual-abuse/resources/covid-19-csa-prevention (last visited September 11, 2021).

107. Walker, *A Long, Dark Shadow*, 118.

108. Walker, *A Long, Dark Shadow*, 119.

109. Walker, *A Long, Dark Shadow*, 11.

110. Walker, *A Long, Dark Shadow*, 11.

111. See Victor I. Vieth, *On this Rock: A Call to Center the Christian Response to Child Abuse on the Life and Words of Jesus* (2018).

112. Jill S. Levenson and Melissa D. Grady, “Preventing Sexual Abuse: Perspectives of Minor-Attracted Persons About Seeking Help,” 31(8) *Sexual Abuse* 991, 993 (2018); J. Michael Bailey, Kevin J. Hsu, and Paula A. Bernard, “An Internet Study of Men Sexually Attracted to Children: Sexual Attraction Patterns,” *Journal of Abnormal Psychology* 125 no. 7 (2016): 976, 981 (noting the men in this large sample “strongly preferred children to adults.”)

113. As one pastoral care textbook notes: “In some states, pastors

accountable those who fail to warn of pending danger (Ezek 33:6). Even if there is not a situation requiring a mandated report, or if a report is not investigated, the church may have to conduct an assessment if the individual with the attraction has been working with youth in the congregation. Confidentiality is also not an option if the individual is at risk of harming themselves.

Second, we need to work with the individual in selecting an appropriate pastoral care worker. Not every clergy is gifted to work with someone sexually attracted to children. Accordingly, it is necessary to find someone willing to grow his or her knowledge of the research in this area, to coordinate pastoral care with appropriate mental health care or other services, and who is willing to work with an individual for an extended period of time.

Third, the church should let the person know that they are not alone. The church will demonstrate its love by doing all it can to help the individual manage their sexual attractions to children and to live a productive life. This may mean a safety plan and other mechanisms by which the church can assist the individual in resisting any temptations.

Fourth, just as a church should educate the congregation of how it works with those convicted or accused of crimes against children, it should also educate the congregation as to how it ministers to those with sexual thoughts about children. In this way, the congregation will never be surprised by a church's ministry to those struggling with these thoughts. Moreover, an open dialogue may help congregants to access these resources should they or a family member require it.

Conclusion

Working with an adult sexually attracted to children who may not have acted on these thoughts may be one of the most difficult tasks a pastor will encounter. A pastor will need to prioritize child

Just as a church should educate the congregation of how it works with those convicted or accused of crimes against children, it should also educate the congregation as to how it ministers to those with sexual thoughts about children. In this way, the congregation will never be surprised by a church's ministry to those struggling with these thoughts.

safety while still addressing the needs for fellowship of the person attracted to minors. Although the pastor needs to develop a relationship where the parishioner can speak candidly, the clergy must also be willing to contact the authorities should there be reason to believe the parishioner has committed a crime. Although the pastor must liberally apply the tonic of the Gospel, the pastor must also take advantage of quality mental health care and other resources God has provided for those struggling with an unwanted thought pattern. In humility, the pastor must regularly fall to their knees in search of God's guidance in navigating these challenges. With God's help, it is possible to protect children, grow the faith of the person struggling with sexual thoughts about children, and to witness the light of God in the darkest of nights.

are state-mandated reporters... But whether or not the law requires a pastor to intervene in such a situation should not be the deciding factor. It is God and his Word that ultimately give pastors the right and responsibility to break confidence and protect the welfare of the person involved." John D. Schuetze, *Doctor of Souls: The Art of Pastoral Theology*, (2017), 272-273.