

# Scandal Follows Normal Path

By Carol Corgan  
ICASA

Male power over women and children, exercised in secrecy and without accountability – it will get ugly. And faith communities are proving it.

Witness the Catholic church and its tradition of sexual abuse perpetrated by priests and covered up by the entire hierarchy. Witness the Mormon fundamentalist community (FLDS), where girls are forced to marry, raped and forced to bear children by the rapists who are their husbands. And most recently, witness the abuse perpetrated by male leaders in Brooklyn's Hasidic Jewish community.

A stream of sexual abuse allegations are emerging in this orthodox community. One survivor, speaking out in a story on National Public Radio (February 2, 2009), tells of abuse by a Rabbi who was his school principal. Another tells of being raped in the mikvah (ritual bath). Neither was able to speak at the time of the abuse. Both have since left the temple and the community.

Brooklyn District Attorney Charles Hynes says his office is investigating 10 cases involving Hasidic Jews. He is furious that the Rabbis review sexual abuse allegations internally in a Rabbinical Court rather than reporting to civil authorities. The District Attorney is trying to secure their agreement to report abuse to him. Currently, yeshivas which are private schools are exempt from mandated reporting in New York. Why does he have to negotiate for this to happen? Why is this group exempt?

The priest, the elder, the rabbi, all male, all religious authorities, all respected leaders in the community. Their integrity, goodness, righteousness is unquestioned and unquestionable. So, when they rape and sexually abuse children in the rectory, the fellowship hall, the mikvah, they do so with impunity. Their power is absolute.

And in each of these faith communities the victim is silenced. The child cannot speak while the representative of God's kingdom fondles, gropes, penetrates. The child has no one to tell about the violation – s/he may not know it is abuse, may not know it is wrong, may not understand the sick feeling in the pit of the stomach, may have no words for this hell, may not expect to be believed. So s/he is silent, or s/he tells and is ignored, disbelieved, told that s/he misunderstood. S/he is punished into silence and continues to be abused. S/he grows up and adapts to a life of abuse and oppression, incorporates the experience as a social norm and may even defend it. Or she eventually rejects the abuse and leaves – to be reviled and shunned by the only home and

community she knows. And, s/he gets little or no support or justice whether s/he is inside or outside the walls.

It seems like a problem this size would claim center stage. Yet, the power of church and faith is so great that the child protection, criminal and civil justice systems are stymied.

Child protection services may want to investigate, may want to take a child or children into protective custody. They may even do it. Police may want to investigate, make arrests, and build a case. Prosecutors may want to file charges and prosecute cases. Civil attorneys may want to sue. And yet, something gets in the way. Religious rights. Parent's rights. Father's rights. Freedom of speech. It's always something other than victim's rights. Instead, the child is sent back to the community, left vulnerable to the abuser, the priest, the elder, the rabbi. Safety and recompense are denied.

So the victims lose - again. They are not believed and not protected. Their safety and welfare and human rights are sacrificed to protect the abuser and the religious community. Whether victims adapt or protest, their fate is in the hands of those who profess to follow the teachings of God and those who defer to the faith leaders.

And really, no one wants to confront the church, sect, temple. No one wants to say that the faith community is not on the side of justice. No one really wants to hold them accountable. No one wants to tell them "no."

We give faith leaders a pass. We accept their assertion that they didn't know. We buy the notion that this loving community, under God, is simply misunderstood. We decide we should not judge the tenets of their faith, their rituals and practices, their freedom. We trust them. We simply cannot believe the truth.

It seems like those who misuse their place in religious hierarchy have the upper hand. Only a small percentage of rapist priests have been jailed. Settlements with the church, though highly publicized, are miniscule compared to the harm done to countless victims. Though the initial reaction to the FLDS was to take children into protective custody, the courts have returned all but two of the 439 children to their fundamentalist community. And Rabbis are getting by with rape. Pearl Engleman, the mother of a Jewish boy abused by a rabbi said: "It's unusual to come forward. It's unusual to be outspoken about issues, especially a subject that's been swept under the rug like this. And [it] hasn't only been swept under the rug, but there are many people standing on the rug." Everyone standing on that rug needs to step back, and those who won't step back need to be pushed back. Then let's lift up the rug, air out the secrets and sweep away the scourge of abuse. Make a promise that communities of faith will be the safe haven they claim to be.

While we're at it, each one of these faith communities needs to cooperate with investigations and apologize to the victims. They need to take responsibility for their ignorance, their silence, their collusion. They need to voluntarily compensate victims who lost their childhood and are struggling with the lifelong effects of sexual abuse. And they need to take abuse prevention as seriously as any other commandment. People of faith need to confront rape in their communities and say "no more."

*Viewpoint is a regular opinion column in Coalition Commentary.  
Carol Corgan is Assistant Director for ICASA.*