Child Safety in Faith Communities:

Moving from Words to Actions

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This learning brief forms part of SVRI's Community of Practice on Faith and Gender-based violence. Its insights emerge from discussions with 30 participants within a newly designed three-month virtual course - Faith and Helping Children Thrive without Violence. This course was co-designed and piloted as a main activity of its 325-member working group from over 60 countries in 6 continents[1]. It centres the lived experiences, stories and practice-based knowledge of selected working group members through structured learning dialogues in early 2025 between participants around 32 short audio-visual contributions which focused specifically on faith and violence against children, and which were provided by other working group members. This brief draws on their voices and insights from diverse faith traditions and countries around the world as well as offering access to videos (5-10 minutes each) from just four of the course contributors that formed the course backbone. Whilst many faith institutions are developing child safeguarding policies, practitioners insist that more work needs to be done to ensure these paper policies translate into practice through building a shared culture of safeguarding if faith institutions are to move from words alone to action.

Suggested Citation:
Palm, S. (2025). Child safety in faith communities: Moving from words to actions. Sexual Violence Research Initiative.
https://www.svri.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/08/WG2_Child-Safety-in-Faith-Communities.pdf

[1] Members of this working group include over 100 child sector practitioners, 50 activists, 40 researchers, 40 faith leaders, 27 academics, 12 private sector workers, 12 government representatives and 14 NGO workers or funders. A significant number of these members are also themselves survivors of violence.

Moving towards child safeguarding

"Child safeguarding refers to the responsibility of all organisations to ensure that their representatives, operations, and activities do not harm children and young people" (Australian Childhood Foundation, 2025).

Dean Juster, Head of Safeguarding at the Salvation Army, UK, reminds us that children's safety is everyone's responsibility, it is not something that can or should be delegated to just a few. This marks a shift from earlier child protection models, which often relied on a single designated protection officer, towards creating organisational cultures in which keeping children safe is a shared active commitment. For participants of SVRI's Working Group on Faith & Ending Violence Against Children, this gives an opportunity for faith institutions to empower and equip people of all ages in their spaces, not as a legal and ethical requirement only, but also as a spiritual commitment rooted in their faith as one leader notes.

"As people of faith, we believe every child is a gift from God, created in God's image, deeply loved, and deserving of protection, dignity, and care. But the reality is many children in our communities are not safe. Some are being hurt in their homes, schools, or even churches, and often suffer in silence because they fear not being believed or supported. As a faith community, we cannot turn a blind eye. We have a responsibility to be watchful, to listen, and to speak out. Child protection is not just a legal matter, it is a spiritual duty. Protecting children is not separate from our faith, it is a living expression of it." (Thembelani, Christian, South Africa)[2]

This brief presents four key learnings which emerged from participants on the 2025 course on Faith and Helping Children Thrive without Violence through structured dialogues with survivors, faith leaders, child sector professionals and critical engagement with theological misinterpretations that can do harm.

Learning 1: Listen to, and involve, survivors of child sexual abuse

Evidence of sexual harms experienced by thousands of girl and boy children by and within faith institutions is undisputed. Reports by the Child Rights International Network in 2014, the Australian Royal Commission in 2017, the UK Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse in 2020 and a 2019 Scoping Study on Faith and Violence against Children by the Joint Learning Initiative show this must be urgently addressed, as both a past legacy, and as present-day realities of perpetration and indirect perpetuation- where silence, inaction, or harmful institutional norms enable abuse to continue with impunity. Some of the apparent strengths of faith institutions such as their authority, structures and perceived legitimacy within communities also have a shadow side. They may increase risks of the abuse of spiritual and social power within faith institutions which must be carefully considered in a culture of child safeguarding.

"Faith leaders have been involved in child molestation, including sexual-related abuse. Some leaders befriend children and start the "grooming process." Children are offered goodies, and religious leaders "pretend" to be nice to the children, luring them to sexual touches that progress to penetrative sexual activities…. Many may have no voice to expose these perpetrators due to their social-religious status and fear of reprisal by the community and fellow Christians." (Michael, Christian, Kenya)

There is an urgent need for all faith institutions to engage proactively with this body of evidence. Practitioners noted that listening to survivors and their stories is an important starting point to acknowledge and confess failures within all faith traditions to keep children safe. This also involves survivors in a joint commitment to hold faith leaders and faith institutions accountable, to address the abuse of spiritual power that can underlie perpetration, to counter silent perpetuation and to reject theological patterns of silence and denial.

BOX 1: LISTENING TO CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE SURVIVORS IN CONVERSATION WITH SUZIE GRECO

Suzie Greco is a survivor of child sexual abuse in a religious context in the USA. As an adult researcher and activist, she works for change within the Church of the Latter-Day Saints. In her video contribution to the course, she shares her identity as a survivor and emphasises the importance of training women in faith institutions as first responders as part of dismantling male to male alliances that can reinforce patriarchy and silence. She also points to the need to better equip faith institutions to recognise and reject models of response where victims are blamed and perpetrators are repositioned as victims. Suzie's bravery in sharing her own story offered a bridge for other participants to engage more personally, a strong feature of wider course success. She asked participants the poignant question, *"Who would I have been, if I had not been abused? I lost almost half of my life due to early child (sexual) abuse. What would my life and the life of my children have been like if I had been treated with dignity and respect during my childhood? Trauma is always intergenerational".* **Click HERE to watch Suzie's 8-minute video contribution which shares her own experience and offers insights from her work with churches.**

Survivor stories and insights, including Suzie's, elicit deepened reflection from course participants about their own contexts and stories as well as the importance of self-healing for all who experience violence or abuse as children as a key part of creating cultures of child safeguarding within faith institutions.

"I resonate with the idea that child safeguarding begins with healing ourselves. In many cultures, including my own, fear-based teachings are often passed down without question, using ideas like curses or divine punishment to enforce obedience. While these may be seen as tools to instil discipline, they silence children and damage their sense of self-worth. I appreciate the emphasis

[2] All direct quotations come from the 2025 Faith and Heping Children Thrive without Violence course participants as part of their learning dialogues with videos and with their permission.

on being a "safe person" for children. Simple acts like listening without judgment or affirming their right to say 'no' are powerful tools to shift dynamics from fear to trust...those of us working in safeguarding must also reflect inwardly. Acknowledging our own experiences helps us move forwards with more empathy and clarity. Only then can we stand beside children with the compassion and awareness they deserve" (Chiranthi, Buddhist, Sri Lanka)

Listening to survivors' voices enables faith institutions to start with real lived experiences and humanises the issue, and also to then involve survivors and their needs in the design and delivery of child safeguarding programmes. Participants felt that this is very important but it needs to be done sensitively.

"Adult survivors like Suzie could and should be involved in educating faith leaders and helping design programs within faith communities. Their lived experiences bring a depth of insight, authenticity, and urgency that theory alone cannot offer. Survivors can help faith leaders understand the real impact of abuse, the failures of current systems, and what meaningful support truly looks like. In my faith context, this could be a powerful way to break silence, challenge harmful norms, and ensure that safeguarding responses are survivor-centred. However, survivors may face stigma, disbelief, or re-traumatisation, especially in environments where abuse is taboo or perpetrators are protected. For involvement to be safe and effective, strong support systems, trauma-informed facilitation, and institutional commitment to listening and change are crucial. When done respectfully, involving survivors can lead to deeper empathy, stronger safeguards, and real transformation in faith spaces." (Mesa, Christian, Zimbabwe)

Learning 2: Engage faith leaders through a faith-informed call to action

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BOX 2: A FAITH-BASED CALL TO ACT - A CONVERSATION WITH DIANA GERSON

Rabbi Diana Gerson, an ordained Jewish faith leader in the USA, speaks in compelling terms about her own faith-based mandate for child safeguarding and the positive power which faith leaders can harness to act for change, if they are appropriately equipped and held accountable. She emphasises the positive theological beliefs that underpin her work as a faith leader around child safeguarding as well as the harm that can happen when faith leaders fail to act, or perpetuate a culture of secrecy, shame and silence. She invites faith leaders across all traditions to move beyond rhetoric to action and to stand up and speak out on this issue as a sacred task. She points to the immense trust placed in faith leaders by children, families and communities and the opportunity this provides for multi-sector and interfaith collaboration. She says, *"It is not enough to say, "we care about children", we must demonstrate this care through actionable safeguarding measures in our places of worship, schools and communities".* **Click HERE to watch Diana's 10-minute video contribution which shares her own faith-driven commitment to safeguard children and the power of faith leaders moving from words to actions.**

Participants reflect on what Diana's call for action as a faith leader means for action in their own diverse faith contexts. Many point to similar core beliefs within their faith traditions, such as that the idea that every human being has immeasurable value and deserves to be treated with dignity and respect. This can translate in their work with children into principles of non-discrimination, accountability and do no harm.

A course participant working with Muslim, Hindu and Buddhist communities, notes that different faiths can find common ground in their shared theological values. She says, "*Diana's emphasis on the principles that all are made in the image of God and a commitment to the vulnerable speaks deeply to the moral and spiritual responsibility of faith communities in safeguarding children. The belief that every person is created in God's image affirms the inherent dignity and worth of each child, making any form of*

abuse a profound violation not only of the child's rights but of a sacred trust. The second principle—a commitment to protect the vulnerable—aligns strongly with religious teachings across traditions that call for justice, compassion, and care for those who cannot protect themselves. These values resonate with me as essential pillars for child protection. They reframe safeguarding not as an external requirement, but as a core expression of faith and worship." (Chiranthi, Buddhist, Sri Lanka).

Crispen, a faith leader from Zimbabwe, notes that for faith leaders to be educated on child safeguarding as Diana insists, this must be included in theological training curriculums. He says, *"Not speaking out is complicity and faith leaders should be the voice of the voiceless, as well as giving voice to children. Collaboration is very important. Churches should work with like-minded organisations to be equipped for effective child safeguarding. On their own, they might not be able to fully achieve the desired results. Faith leaders should take the initiative as first responders. When a child who has been abused comes to them, they should be aware of all the necessary procedures, including mandatory reporting. They should encourage the child to speak out and must act responsibly as these children have trusted them." (Crispen, Christian, Zimbabwe)*

Jeremiah works in a faith-based organisation in Liberia with Muslim and Christian faith leaders. He agrees with Diana's claim that faith leaders' silence in the fact of child abuse amounts to complicity. For him, moving beyond words into action requires honest self-reflection and a willingness to confront harmful norms and he points to three key steps, *"First, they must educate themselves on child protection and trauma-informed care, while actively listening to survivors and learning from their stories. Second, concrete actions such as adopting safeguarding policies, creating safe reporting systems, and encouraging open dialogue about abuse are vital. Preaching dignity without ensuring safety is empty. Third, faith leaders must challenge cultural and theological narratives that excuse silence, by speaking out and standing with survivors, even when it's uncomfortable. True spiritual leadership demands courage, accountability, and a commitment to safety, healing, and justice." (Jeremiah, Christian, Liberia)*

Learning 3: Go beyond policies only to create cultures of child safeguarding

Course contributor Ann-Christina Gamillscheg from Denmark points out that while many faith institutions may want to develop a consistent culture of child safeguarding, they may feel overwhelmed. In her experience, the first step is to create safe spaces to build shared agreement around what are the risks to children in the specific context using dialogue tools with faith leaders. Many participants agree with strengthening the capacity of all faith leaders and some also emphasise the specific value of equipping other non-ordained faith leaders, including women, as first responders.

"I feel strongly that training women as first responders to violence against children and equipping them to offer spiritual counselling is both a powerful and necessary step, especially in contexts where male-to-male alliances among clergy create barriers to accountability. In many faith settings, male leaders often hesitate to confront fellow men, particularly those in positions of power, out of fear of disrupting relationships, reputations, or institutional stability. This silence perpetuates harm. In my own faith context, this approach could be transformative. Women often hold trusted roles in pastoral care and community support, even if they are not in top leadership positions. Training them in trauma-informed care and child protection would not only fill a critical gap in survivor support but also help shift harmful gender dynamics. It would bring a more compassionate, justice-oriented response rooted in lived empathy. However, for this to truly work, institutional backing, theological support, and community awareness are essential." (Mesa, Christian, Zimbabwe)

While this reflects the vital role women often play in community care, it should not place disproportionate responsibility on them, potentially allowing male leaders and congregants to remain silent or disengaged. In many faith spaces, power dynamics continue to privilege male voices and authority, making it even more critical to ensure that child safeguarding is understood and enacted as a shared responsibility across all genders and leadership roles.

Course contributor Sonali Owen is a social worker working in Australia and the Pacific. She insists that when considering how to develop a culture of safeguarding in faith institutions, principles of age-appropriate child participation must be embedded for children to not only be safe but also to feel safe. Faith institutions should involve children directly in the process of designing child safeguarding systems and in choosing the people who will be involved in it. This takes seriously children's feelings about who they feel are safe adults. She also suggests it's important to look at what already exists in the local community to see if there are existing safe persons that children already go to and to build on those resources.

BOX 3: TRAUMA INFORMED CARE - A CONVERSATION WITH DANIELLE MOOSAJI

Course contributor Daniella Moosaji, Director of Arise South Africa, works with local faith institutions to equip them to help all children to both be and feel safe. She sees child safeguarding as a way of being, not only a policy or guidelines of checks and balances. She shares eight trauma-informed principles for first responders to child abuse that faith institutions can use. **Click HERE to watch Danielle's 10-minute video contribution where she shares about these eight below principles and what they mean in practice for faith institutions.**

EIGHT TRAUMA-INFORMED CARE PRINCIPLES

1. **Create safety for children when they report abuse initially** – avoid any fears of judgement, blame or punishment if they tell the truth of their story and what has happened to them.

2. **Build trust and transparency** – communicate with the child and tell them clearly what will happen next. Don't make promises that cannot be kept as this breaks the trust between you and the child.

3. **Empowerment** – give voice and space to the child and affirm that they are right to have spoken out even if it is about a close family member or faith leader. Ask them directly- what do they need to feel safe.

4. **Collaboration** – work with the child to decide next steps together and also reach out to other child protection partners outside your faith institution which will need to be in place already.

5. **Offer Choices and Control** – to help give children as much of a sense of choice and agency within the process as possible, e.g. do they want to select an adult accompaniment person for them?

6. **Build Resilience** – build on the strengths of the child and reinforce these in the process – don't just see them as helpless. They have acted in a positive way by speaking up and may need stories of hope.

7. **Be Aware of Social Norms** – take note of existing gendered, cultural and historical social expectations that may shape how communities respond to reports e.g. if a boy child reports sexual abuse.

8. **Identify Peer Mentors** – have younger peers who can also provide additional child-to-child support to the child as well as ensuring adult peer support for the first responder themselves.

Participants affirm that these principles resonated within their faith contexts. Charles from Kenya notes that, "*The principle that stood out most for me from Danielle's presentation was Empowerment, Voice and Choice. This is very important in situations where spiritual authority can sometimes silence or marginalize children's experiences. Children must be seen not only as recipients of care but as active participants in their healing journeys. By fostering environments where their voices are heard and respected, faith institutions can transform power dynamics that often discourage disclosure of abuse or violence. When children know their voices matter, they are more likely to seek help, which is foundational for healing and spiritual growth." (Charles, Christian, Kenya)*

Fatuma from Uganda sees this empowerment of children as being key in her Islamic faith context where religious schools were a common feature, saying *"Children need to be able to identify what is violence and what they can do. They have to be active participants in their own safety. In my context, children formed child protection committees and gave themselves responsibilities. These committees were given a slot to talk at school assemblies and give an update on the safety issue they faced and how they addressed them. This helped in hearing their voices. When a child is empowered, they can report violence and contribute towards safety interventions." (Fatuma, Muslim, Uganda)*

Learning 4: Address forms of theological misuse that can do further harm

Finally, many participants and contributors pointed to ways in which faith leaders need to directly address theological responses that do harm, as well as be aware of the risks of spiritual abuse being used to underpin perpetration and educate their adherents of all ages to question and refute them. Course contributor Daniela Gennrich from South Africa points to forms of spiritual abuse where sacred texts, rituals or authorities are misused to instil fear, shame or guilt in children who are experiencing sexual abuse by parents or religious leaders. This was also reinforced by a Christian faith leader in Nigeria:

"In some religious settings, children may be told that if they disobey their parents, question religious teachings, or fail to perform religious rituals perfectly, they will go to hell, be cursed, or bring misfortune to their family. This leverages sacred texts or spiritual authority to instil fear, shame, and guilt. Becoming a safe person for children means creating an environment where they feel heard, valued, protected, and free from judgment or fear. Practical ways to do this daily include; Listen without judgment; Believe them; Respect their voice and feelings; Help children understand their right to say "no" to anything that feels wrong or unsafe—even with adults." (Oluwasegun, Christian, Nigeria)

BOX 4: CHALLENGING THEOLOGICAL MISUSE - A CONVERSATION WITH OLUCHI ANICHE

Oluchi Aniche is a Catholic woman who works with sexually abused children in Nigeria. She speaks about specific realities in her own faith context whereby certain theological beliefs or values can be misused, sometimes unwittingly, to justify silence, shame, complicity or a failure to act to prevent or respond to cases of child sexual abuse. One of the particular examples that she gives is where many faith leaders in her context focus theologically on calling for mercy or forgiveness for perpetrators, rather than calling for justice for their victims. **Click HERE to watch Oluchi's 5-minute video contribution where she highlights the dangers of this theological misuse and points to the role faith leaders can play in challenging this.**

Participants from different contexts and faiths reinforced Oluchi's concerns and highlighted the need for faith institutions to challenge and reinterpret beliefs that can indirectly cause more harm to children.

Esther from Zambia notes, *"Oluchi's analysis highlights an important discussion about how cultural and religious interpretations can sometimes lead to harmful practices. While the Catholic Church does not endorse child marriage, certain societal influences may misinterpret religious teachings in ways that contribute to such practices. The Church emphasises the dignity of individuals, the sanctity of marriage, and the importance of informed consent in unions. However, historical and cultural contexts may distort these principles, leading to problematic outcomes. Ideas that child marriage is promoted to prevent sexual promiscuity reflect broader concerns about controlling morality through restrictive measures. Addressing these requires critical engagement with religious teachings, ensuring interpretations align with human dignity, autonomy and ethical responsibility." (Esther, Christian, Zambia)*

An insight emerging across many participants is that far more theological nuance is needed around how mercy and forgiveness can be misapplied in practice, and they point to alternative theological resources. Tanya from Portugal insists that "*mercy belongs to the victims, not the perpetrators and forgiveness does not equate to reconciliation. It requires perpetrators to first acknowledge the harm they've caused, make accountable amends, and then honestly examine what future possibilities may emerge. True healing begins only when accountability paves the way forward" (Tanya, Christian, Portugal).* As a researcher with faith-based organisations, she often sees a disconnect between measures for outward safeguarding and ongoing reluctance for internal accountability with a tendency to protect faith institutions still often prevailing in practice over the protection of those harmed. Many participants found Oluchi's contribution both enlightening and challenging. Whilst they saw mercy as a core Christian value, extending it to abusers without holding them accountable was a misapplication enabling cycles of violence, especially within families, to continue, silences victims and makes churches unsafe spaces.

These insights all highlight that whilst faith leaders and spiritual beliefs can provide a powerful motivator towards child safeguarding, they can also, sometimes unwittingly, do further harm. Faith leaders must be willing to first listen deeply to survivors, commit to act, capacitate themselves about how to do this but also be self-critical of the misuse of theological beliefs that may cause more harm.

Conclusion

In this learning brief, practitioners from diverse contexts and faiths shared their insights on some key steps that they feel need to be taken for a shared culture of child safeguarding to go beyond words into action within faith institutions. This invites deepened reflection both from faith leaders and all those who work on child safeguarding in faith communities together. Conversational formats such as those showcased in this learning brief can offer important ways to learn together in deeper and practical ways.

"As someone who works closely with children and churches, course contributions on specific issues such as spiritual abuse and the necessity of becoming safe people for children were very profound. Contributors helped me reflect on how sacred texts and positions of power can be weaponized if not stewarded responsibly. The course challenged me to examine how my own theology and leadership practices either create safety or perpetuate silence for children….faith institutions, while respected and trusted, can also be places where abuse is hidden due to hierarchical power and silence. Contributors gave us practical suggestions on safeguarding work to create safe spaces for honest dialogue. Without this, policies become hollow." (Charles, Christian, Kenya)

Selected Resources for Faith Institutions to Use

Danish Child Protection Network. 2024. How to develop a Child Safeguarding and Protection Policy for your organisation.

ECPAT & Religions for Peace. 2016. Protecting Children from Online Sexual Exploitation: A guide to action for religious leaders and communities.

We Will Speak Out South Africa. 2018. Church Resource Manual: Contextual Bible Studies on sexual and gender-based violence.

Palm, S. 2019. "A Time to Confess? An ecclesiology of vulnerability in the light of #metoo".

VIVA Network. 2017. Child Friendly Church Workshop Resource.

We would like to thank and acknowledge the important contributions and insights ffrom specific course participants and other selected working group members that made this learning brief possible.