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SKILLS *for* SAFEGUARDING

A GUIDE to PREVENTING
ABUSE *and* FOSTERING
HEALING in the CHURCH

EXCERPT

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Skills for Safeguarding

A Guide to Preventing Abuse and Fostering Healing in the Church

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Christians are called to serve abuse survivors and cultivate a culture that protects the vulnerable. Designed specifically for Christian organizations, this textbook on safeguarding trains and equips pastors, mental health professionals, and all church members to prevent abuse, act when abuse happens, and promote healing for survivors.

Your Valued Role in Safeguarding

You are the most valuable asset of the church. You are the hands, feet, and mouthpiece of Jesus on this earth against the evil principalities and powers that plot to bring harm and destruction. That statement may sound grandiose but will be validated as you read the chapters outlining the unconscionable reality of abuse, particularly against children. As is often quoted, “The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men to do nothing.” For too long, abuse in the church has been concealed not only by perpetrators but also by others who choose to look the other way or even enable the harmful behaviors to continue. Based on Matthew 25:45-46, what we fail to do for the powerless, we fail to do for the Lord. However, when godly women and men take action against abuse and its destruction, evil will no longer flourish.

This is the opportune time to become involved in safeguarding. Modern society has oversexualized children, and child pornography and human trafficking are at epic proportions (Woldehanna et al., 2023). There are even marginal secular groups that seek to normalize pedophilia as an alternative sexual preference that they claim people should be free to act on. The church should be a pillar of sexual morality and a safe refuge for all people, but too often, it has been a place where people have used their power and spiritual authority to exploit others. We have repeatedly seen the pervasive evil of sexual abuse in the church and subsequent coverups publicly exposed by courageous survivors and diligent investigative journalists. It is time for the church to take its rightful place on the front lines against all forms of abuse—both in the community and within its own walls. We need to be so appalled by evil that we use our voices, our energy, and all our resources to expose what is hidden in darkness, stand with those who have been harmed, and bring those who perpetrate harm to justice.

This work is worth doing, and it will cost you. It will require you to turn toward the reality of trauma rather than looking away. You will be challenged to courageously advocate for the voiceless, sometimes even at personal cost. As you engage in this work and seek to do good, you will clearly see the evil in the world. It will change you. You will feel overwhelmed by the harsh reality that trauma is a global pandemic and that abuse is prevalent across gender, race, ethnicity, socioeconomic levels, nations, religions, and church denominations. The fact that so many precious, innocent children have been violated in youth programs, vacation Bible schools, summer camps, church settings, and Christian homes by those who claim to serve in the name of Jesus will incite disgust and rage. Use your rage to fuel your mission, and use your anger to advocate for those without a voice. We must work to strengthen our ability to “not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good” (Romans 12:21).

Safeguarding will be a multigenerational mission of change. It requires an army of laborers committed to advocating for the vulnerable for the rest of their lives to reverse a culture of complicity that suppresses the truth to preserve power and protect an institution. Equipping the saints with tools to prevent abuse and care for survivors will take time. However, significant systemic change for the church is possible. Training in safeguarding skills is a crucial step in this journey. When reflecting on the presence of evil and the justice of God, the psalmist writes, “The wicked plots against the righteous, and gnashes his teeth at him; but the LORD laughs at the wicked, for he sees that his day is coming” (Psalm 37:12-13 RSV). We can be confident that ultimate victory is with the Lord. We will win the war against abuse through our obedience to the Lord’s calling to serve and by the guidance and power of his Holy Spirit.

—Adapted from the introduction



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Lisa Compton is associate professor and assistant director of the doctoral program in counselor education and supervision at Regent University. She is a licensed social worker, certified trauma treatment specialist, and coauthor of the textbook *Preparing for Trauma Work in Clinical Mental Health*.

The Essential Guide to Safeguarding for Ministries

Lisa Compton and Taylor Patterson’s Skills for Safeguarding is the first and the definitive textbook on safeguarding, bringing up-to-date research along with biblical insight to this important topic.

Safeguarding is such a new term (though not a new need). What’s your “elevator version” of a definition?

Lisa Compton and Taylor Patterson: Safeguarding is the shared responsibility of every individual in the church to use their power and influence to protect vulnerable members from harm. It calls on us all to be proactive in understanding the impact of trauma, identifying signs of abuse, responding well to crises, and providing compassionate care to trauma survivors. In other words, work to prevent harm in the church; but if it happens, handle it with skillful compassion.

Tell us a little about the state of safeguarding education in the US and around the world.

Compton and Patterson: Safeguarding remains largely absent from the church’s common vernacular and is not yet a mandated part of ministry leader formation. Safeguarding training is also severely underemphasized in the missions community, even though it is one of the most critical issues in cross-cultural ministry.

While much of the research and vocational efforts in this area have been concentrated within the Catholic Church, other organizations are emerging globally, such as GRACE in the US, offering essential guidance on policy development and crisis response. Despite this, most grassroots efforts to address church trauma remain largely disconnected.

Our aim with this text is to provide a unified training manual that equips individuals with key safeguarding skills while bridging gaps and fostering collaboration across organizations.

Safeguarding is inherently multidisciplinary, isn’t it? Which fields are most involved, and how did you two, as authors, go about incorporating expertise that fills out the full picture?

Compton and Patterson: Yes, safeguarding spans many disciplines including ministry, mental health, and criminal justice. For this project, we brought together contributors from several countries, representing diverse disciplines and denominations. It was an honor to collaborate with so many leading trauma experts, but we faced the challenge of taking their vast expertise and multiple voices and shaping the individual chapters into a cohesive, accessible message. This was quite an undertaking, but doing so allowed us to create a well-rounded resource that can be used in the local church, academic settings, and parachurch ministries.

What kind of resources are still most needed for the practice and teaching of safeguarding?

Compton and Patterson: Our fields of counseling and psychology have grown exponentially in the understanding of trauma in the past several decades. This text seeks to integrate those scientific discoveries with the timeless biblical truths found in Scripture. Our goal was to create a resource that meets the rigorous standards of academic research while remaining accessible



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Taylor Patterson is a licensed professional counselor specializing in trauma, including survivors of domestic violence, sexual assault, and human trafficking. She has presented at local and national conferences and is published in peer-reviewed journals. She is currently a PhD candidate in Counselor Education and Supervision.

to everyone in the church community. We hope this book will inspire every believer to leverage their influence and take action, making a tangible difference in safeguarding efforts.

Where have you found inspiration and encouragement for the journey of working on a book that tackles such a weighty need?

Compton and Patterson: Absolutely, we felt the heavy responsibility of addressing the urgent need for safeguarding training in the church, deeply aware of the spiritual battle surrounding abuse. Each time a church leader was exposed in the media for abusing their power, it was gut-wrenching, especially when compounded by reports of cover-ups (while we also see this exposure as a critical opportunity for the church to confront these issues head-on).

We have had to remind ourselves of the character of God—that he is a God of justice who cares deeply for the vulnerable. We are called to participate in this work alongside him, and he has been faithful to equip and sustain us. As coauthors we were able to support and challenge one another throughout the process, and that partnership gave us the courage we needed. We think that courage fueled by collaboration is essential for anyone committed to making a real difference in safeguarding efforts. This is not a work you can do alone.

What's next for you?

Compton and Patterson: We aim to offer consultations for helping professionals such as counselors, missionaries, and ministry leaders that are focused on personal wellness and resilience, empowering them to lead from a place of health and strength. In addition, we are conducting research on the personal risks involved in providing trauma care, a concept termed absorption vulnerability, and are in the process of developing an assessment tool to measure helpers' risks and provide prevention tools.



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