

# A Little Child Shall Lead Them: A Special APSAC Advisor on the Need for Faith and Child Protection Leaders to Collaborate in Addressing the Spiritual Impact of Child Maltreatment

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*“The wolf will live with the lamb, the leopard will lie down with the goat, the calf and the lion and the yearling together; and a little child will lead them.” – Isaiah 11:6 (NIV)*

A significant and growing body of research documents that many maltreated children are not only physically and emotionally impacted by abuse, but also spiritually wounded (Russell 2018; Vieth and Singer 2019). The spiritual impact of abuse has been documented among Christian (Pereda, et al 2022), Jewish (Krinkin et al, 2022), and Muslim (Chowdhury, et al, 2022) communities. As an illustration of the spiritual torment some maltreated children face, consider these words from one survivor:

Why did God let me suffer the agonies of [child abuse]? Why did God not intervene when I cried out to him night after night for relief? I have imagined at times my guardian angel pulling on God’s sleeve and saying ‘Don’t you hear little Wesley? Don’t you see his pitiful tears? Can’t you do something to deliver him from this monstrous evil?’ (Stafford 2010).

The spiritual impact of abuse is particularly pronounced when the person who abuses the child is a member of the clergy or another faith leader (Pereda, et al, 2022). These perpetrators typically incorporate religious themes into the abuse of the child (Vieth, 2025). The piety of a religious leader engaged in the impious act of abuse creates spiritual confusion in and of itself. Consider, for example, these comments from a boy who was sexually abused by a rabbi:

Once, after we were together, we got dressed and he put on his shoes like you do according to halacha [Jewish law], first right, then left, then he tied the left shoe and the right one. And I remember myself standing there and looking at him, and for a split-second feeling like I was hallucinating. We just did really forbidden things and now he piously observes the halacha about shoes? It seemed surreal to me (Krinkin, et al, 2022).

At the same time, spirituality and religiosity can be a significant sources of resilience which mitigate the physical and emotional impact of child abuse (Gower et al, 2020; Jouriles, et al 2020). Maltreated children who are in spiritual distress may display more severe trauma symptoms than other maltreated children and thus require expedited mental health services (Jouriles, et al, 2025).

Maltreated children frequently raise religious or spiritual questions during a forensic interview (Tishelman & Fontes, 2017) and at other points during an investigation and prosecution of child abuse. Unfortunately, very few forensic interviewers, investigators, mental or medical health providers, or prosecutors are fluent in the research on the spiritual impact of trauma or know how to apply this research to an individual case (Cross, et al., Vieth & Cross 2025).

There are hopeful signs that child protection professionals are realizing the critical importance of addressing the spiritual impact of child abuse and empowering, or at least not inhibiting, a victim’s access to spirituality as a source of resilience. Some CACs have implemented chaplaincy or spiritual care programs (Vieth et al, 2020). The Association

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of Professionals Solving the Abuse of Children (APSAC) has developed a membership section for faith leaders and has a track at its annual colloquium for faith and child protection leaders to grow their skills in addressing the spiritual needs of maltreated children and their families.

### **The articles in this special issue**

In this special issue of the APSAC Advisor, Matthew Belser, a judge who formerly served as a child abuse prosecutor, addresses some of the cultural and religious factors that aid some offenders in violating children and inhibit religious communities in responding with excellence to instances of abuse. Although Belser's article focuses on the Christian community, much of the content can be applied to other faith communities as well.

One of the religious factors contributing to child maltreatment is the belief in some faith communities that God requires parents or other caregivers to hit a child as a means of discipline (Vieth, 2013). Researchers Cindy Miller-Perrin and Robin Perrin summarize several studies finding that a culturally humble approach to this challenging topic can change attitudes and corporal punishment practices in religious communities.

Dr. Donald Walker penned an article offering concrete guidance for clinicians in treating children who are spiritually impacted by child maltreatment. Alissa Ackerman and Guila Benchimol offer guidance for healing in faith communities through a restorative justice model. Lastly, Victor Vieth discusses the critical importance for faith leaders to theologically engage with the subject of child abuse as a means of preventing abuse and, when it cannot be prevented, to respond with excellence.

### **A tribute to Pete Singer**

This special issue of the APSAC Advisor ends with a tribute to Pete Singer, the first recipient of APSAC's Faith Leadership Award. This award will be

presented annually to an "individual or organization within the faith community whose leadership, advocacy, and action have advanced child protection and maltreatment prevention. Recipients use their platform to create safe, supportive, and trauma-informed spaces for children and families."

Although Pete Singer died from cancer in 2025, his 30-year career left a lasting mark on both the faith and child protection community. Pete's remarkable work is remembered in a eulogy from Victor Vieth at Pete's memorial service, which is reprinted in this special issue.

### **An openness to learning from children**

As faith and child protection leaders work to address the spiritual needs of maltreated children, these professionals may gain a deeper appreciation of their own values and sense of morality. Indeed, there is a growing "child theology" movement in which scholars are doing a deeper dive on the many accounts of children in the Bible and what we can learn from the wisdom, courage, and theological insights of youth (Bunge, 2021; Stollar, 2023).

In his research on the religiosity of children, David Heller writes: "In their simplest phrases and play actions, [the] lives [of children] sometimes offer educational and religious lessons more profound than the prepared curricula and sermons of the adult world. We need to provide a forum for the children to express themselves, and we need to listen to their words with an open, religious heart" (Heller, 1986, p. 4).

This special issue of the APSAC Advisor is a call to listen to the words of children with an open heart. In so doing, we may not only be able to help these children, but we may also gain valuable lessons from their spiritual struggles and from their often prophetic voices.

### About the Authors



**Victor Vieth, JD, MA**, is Director of the Center for Faith & Child Protection at Zero Abuse Project. He is a former child abuse prosecutor who received national recognition for his work addressing child abuse in rural communities. He went on to serve as Director of the National Center for Prosecution of Child Abuse. Mr. Vieth spearheaded the implementation of 22 state and international forensic interviewing courses. He was also instrumental in developing Child Advocacy Studies (CAST) undergraduate and graduate programs now implemented in more than 100 colleges, universities, law schools, medical schools and seminaries in 30 states. Mr. Vieth has published numerous scholarly articles related to the investigation, prosecution, and prevention of child abuse and neglect. He has also written secular and theological works addressing the intersection of religion and child maltreatment including the books *On this Rock: A Call to Center the Christian Response to Child Abuse on the Life and Words of Jesus* and *Here We Stand: A Lutheran Response to Child Abuse* (co-edited with Craig L. Nesson). Mr. Vieth has received numerous awards including the Victim Rights Legend Award from the United States Department of Justice, the Pro Humanitate Award from the North American Resource Center for Child Welfare, the Heritage Service Award from the National Partnership to End Interpersonal Violence (NPEIV), the Lifetime Achievement Award from the Institute on Violence, Abuse & Trauma (IVAT), and the Change Maker Award from the Academy on Violence & Abuse (AVA). Mr. Vieth holds degrees from Winona State University, Hamline University School of Law, and Wartburg Theological Seminary.



For 35 years, **Theodore Cross** has been conducting research on the system response to child abuse and neglect. He is the 2018 recipient of the Mark Chaffin Outstanding Research Career Achievement Award from the American Professional Society on the Abuse of Children. He currently serves on the Board of Directors of APSAC, chairs the Publications Committee, is the Associate Editor of the APSAC Advisor, and serves on the Editorial Board of the journal *Child Maltreatment*. Dr. Cross directed the Multi-Site Evaluation of Children's Advocacy Centers, the largest, most rigorous study of CAC impact. He was the principal investigator on two grants from the National Institute of Justice to conduct social science research on the use and impact of biological evidence in child, adolescent and adult sexual cases. He has co-authored numerous articles on investigation and prosecution of child maltreatment. Dr. Cross was the PI for pioneering research on the impact of Child Advocacy Studies Training (CAST), a national movement to provide education on child maltreatment to graduate and undergraduate students in child-serving disciplines. He is leading ground-breaking research on an innovative training method using simulations of child protection interventions to provide experiential learning for caseworkers in the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services. Dr. Cross has also played a substantial role in studying child welfare processes and outcomes, using both national and state data on child protective services involvement and child well-being.

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