

# What a Difference One Life Makes: The Faith-Filled Journey and Child Protection Legacy of Pete Singer

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In keynote addresses and workshops across the country, Pete Singer spoke of an experience from his childhood that deepened his understanding of suffering and influenced the trajectory of Pete's life.<sup>1</sup>

When he was a boy, Pete had a friend named Bobby. One day, after spending time at Pete's house, Bobby's mother came to pick up her son. Pete's mother commented on how well-behaved Bobby was and how she wished she could keep him. Taking the comment literally, Bobby's mother said, "Only if you can take all my children. You have to take them all."

What Pete didn't know at the time was that Bobby's father was a child abuser who was violent to Bobby, to Bobby's siblings, and to Bobby's mother. Bobby's mother sought refuge from her church, but her pastor told her the obvious problem was that she was not adequately submitting to her husband, and so she returned to a violent home. Seeing no other recourse to save her children, Bobby's mother killed her husband, becoming one of first women in the United States to successfully assert Battered Women's Syndrome as a defense (Hagen, 2024).

In the aftermath of this tragedy, Pete's mom told him, "This is what happens when churches and child protection communities fail to work together." It was a lesson Pete never forgot.

Pete dedicated his life to helping children like Bobby. For more than 30 years, Pete served children as a social worker, therapist, foster parent, consultant, teacher, writer, and eventually the national director of GRACE (Godly Response to Abuse in the Christian Environment)—an organization that works to improve the skills of faith leaders in recognizing and responding to abuse.

As a mental health provider, Pete encountered a sea of spiritually wounded children who struggled to find God amidst their anguish. Pete and I wrote an article on the spiritual damage caused by child abuse (Vieth & Singer, 2019). In that article Pete wrote about a seven-year-old child who was beaten, locked in closets, witnessed domestic violence, and was eventually abandoned. This child reached the following conclusions about God: "There's lots of bad things in the world. That's just how God created the world. Murderers. Kidnappers. He [God] pressed a button, and he made a mistake...He shouldn't have let those people do those things! [God] made a mistake" (Vieth & Singer, 2019, p. 1222).

This is what happens when churches and child protection communities fail to work together.

Pete came into my life 20 years ago. I was giving a keynote address at a child abuse conference here in Minnesota and mentioned an initiative in South Carolina called HALOS (Helping and Lending Outreach Support)—a coalition of churches and synagogues working with child protection professionals to meet the needs of maltreated children. Pete Singer was in the audience that day and he was moved by the work that was being done in South Carolina. Just as he was troubled by the knowledge of what happens when faith and child protection communities fail to work together, Pete was now emboldened by the possibility of what could happen if faith and child protection communities *did* work together.

Pete reached out to me to learn more, and I connected him with the leaders of the HALOS program. From there, Pete worked with faith and

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1 See e.g. Pete Singer keynote at the Global Health Summit of the Academy on Violence & Abuse, St. Paul Minnesota, 2019, available at: <https://vimeo.com/1084834080>

## Pete Singer

child protection leaders to form a program called Care-in-Action, a program that developed faith and child protection collaborations in several Minnesota communities.

In one case, a mother and her three children fled an abusive partner, but their only housing option was a mobile home with a large hole in the floor covered with a loose piece of plywood. The danger was heightened by the harshness of a Minnesota winter. A social worker explained the crisis to Care in Action, a church member who installed floors professionally donated the labor, and the church paid for the materials. While working in the home, the church member noticed other needs—such as the need for a refrigerator—needs the church now offered to help with as well.

This is what happens when churches and child protection communities work together.

In another case, three children were removed from their home because of repeated abuse and neglect, but there wasn't a foster home that could take all three children. During regular sibling visits, one of the foster families grew to love all three children and inquired about adopting them. The county denied the request because their home wasn't big enough for three children. If, though, the family could convert an attached garage to living space, the county would approve the adoption. Unfortunately, the family lacked the money to do this. Care in Action found members of the faith community to pay for the materials, church workers performed the labor and all the children were reunited in what became their forever home.

Care in Action eventually served over 2,000 maltreated, neglected, and suffering children. This is what happens when faith and child protection communities work together.

As a result of his labor with Care in Action, Pete began to receive national attention. My organization and others began to invite him to speak. As a result, similar faith and child protection collaborations began to blossom. Eventually, Pete was hired to serve as the executive director of GRACE where he implemented

and expanded multiple pioneering initiatives to improve the lives of children in need.

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Pete also began to write, and his articles influenced thousands. Allow me to give two examples. In the United States, there are some investigators who believe it is acceptable when responding to a case in which a child is depicted on film being sexually abused to show the child a cropped image of themselves to verify that they are the victim in the film. Although this may quicken the investigation, it may also produce trauma to the child. Pete was the lead author on a 49-page scholarly article with 161 footnotes that meticulously walks the reader through the danger and offers concrete suggestions for interviewing a sexually exploited child without showing them an image of their abuse (Singer & Farrell 2022).

Shortly after Pete went into hospice care, I was teaching in Rochester, New York at a regional child abuse conference for 1,500 professionals. In the opening keynote, Dr. Sharon Cooper, one of the world's foremost experts on the sexual exploitation of children, began by displaying Pete's article on a screen and telling everyone in the room that this is the path forward and there is simply no need to risk re-traumatizing a child by showing them an image of their trauma. Dr. Cooper is repeating that message at other conferences to both a national and international audience. Pete's one article will reduce the suffering of countless children.

In 2024, Pete wrote a scholarly theological article entitled "Toward a More Trauma-Informed Church: Equipping Faith Communities to Prevent and Respond to Abuse" (Singer 2024). More than any other article before, Pete meticulously walked the reader through what it means to be a trauma-informed church. Equally important, he walked the reader through the many accounts of trauma in the Bible and showed us that caring for the abused and oppressed is not a peripheral obligation of the church, it is at the very heart of what it means to be a follower of Christ.

In the closing paragraph of this article Pete writes:

The world at the time of Christ was filled with trauma. War, oppression, sexual violence, child abuse, clergy abuse, spiritual abuse, and more left deep scars on many lives and communities. Into that world of despair came an unquenchable hope. Jesus proclaimed his purpose to create a way to God, to bring healing to those who suffered, and to call for justice for the oppressed. Jesus' focus remains unchanged, and he calls the church to reflect his heart, to be salt and light in a world of tribulation, and to be a source of hope and healing. If Jesus calls his church to this mission, we have no choice but to follow (Singer 2024, p. 76).

Through his decades of service to children, Pete followed Jesus into all the places where boys and girls suffer. Through his long battle with cancer, Pete also understood personal suffering and he faced this disease with courage and hope. After his death, I spoke to many people around the country who said Pete had reached out to them in his final days and they were struck by how much he was focused on comforting *them* in this time of departure. Simply stated, Pete remained a social worker to the very end.

A few days before he died, I visited with Pete in his home, and I asked him what he thought heaven was like. Pete became reflective, his eyes filled with tears and then, with all the strength a dying man can muster, Pete said:

There is so much suffering in this world, so many hurting children. Heaven won't be like that. Heaven is a place where we won't need child protection policies because all the children will be safe. And all the children who had a distorted view of God because of the abuse they endured and the failure of the Christian community to care for them will have new eyes and for the very first time, they will see the love of God.

Pete Singer followed Jesus into a life of service to hurting children. On the other side of his last earthly breath, Pete followed Jesus into a world where fear and tears and pain no longer exist. A land where, in the words of Isaiah, 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). ■

## Endnotes

Hagen, C.S. *She shot her husband while he slept, and was acquitted*, InForUm, December 22, 2024, available online at: <https://www.inforum.com/news/the-vault/she-shot-her-husband-while-he-slept-and-was-acquitted>

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## About the Author

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