

PREDATOR in the **PEWS**

Houses of worship are a place for the community to come together. They are also prime targets for pedophiles looking to groom victims.

George Zirwas wanted to join the priesthood, and, in September 1979, he was ordained in the Catholic Church and received an assignment under the Diocese of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. Zirwas would go on to serve in eight different parishes until 1995 when he was placed on a leave of absence until his death in 2001. He would also go on to molest numerous children.

The first allegations came in 1987 when another priest in the diocese met with the family of a boy about an “incident of inappropriate touch” by Zirwas, according to *Report I of the 40th Statewide Investigating Grand Jury*, published by the Office of Attorney General of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania in July 2018.

Another incident occurred in 1988 when church officials met with the mother of a 16-year-old boy who said Zirwas gave him alcohol and then touched him inappropriately.

“That same month, the Diocese received another report from a victim who revealed that he was groped by Zirwas when he was 17 years old,” the report said. “Zirwas was sent to St. Luke’s Institute for an evaluation in December 1988. Upon his release he once again continued in ministry.”

Similar episodes would occur throughout the course of Zirwas’s time as a priest until he was placed on leave in 1995. He then moved to Havana, Cuba, to work with the “poor and needy” until he was murdered inside his apartment in 2001. He was never held accountable for his abuse.

A later investigation found that Zirwas was part of a ring of predatory priests operating within the Diocese of Pittsburgh. They shared information on victims and exchanged victims amongst themselves.

“This ring also manufactured child pornography on Diocesan property, including parishes and rectories,” according to the report.

Zirwas’s abusive actions were just some of hundreds revealed throughout the course of a two-year grand jury investigation into sexual abuse of children by more than 300 priests within six dioceses of the Catholic Church in Pennsylvania.

“Over one thousand child victims were identifiable, from the church’s own records,” the grand jury wrote in its report. “We believe that the real number—of children whose records were lost, or who were afraid ever to come forward—is in the thousands.”

Sex and crime are typically not activities we consider when we think about places of worship. However, churches, mosques, temples, and synagogues are not exempt from abusive clergy. Many abusers are never held accountable as they change memberships and move to another area, state, or country.

Houses of worship with nurseries, preschools, children’s programs, youth ministries, gymnasiums, and youth transportation have a responsibility to keep children in their care safe. And security professionals have a unique role to play.

Profile of a Predator

Many predators hunt for long periods of time before targeting a specific victim. Pedophiles may attend services as a means of control or to convince victims that they are righteous people whose behavior is justified. The victim may be bullied into compliance, and the crime is often never exposed.

In recent years, more research has come out to attempt to explain the behavior of pedophiles and how they target their victims.

Since 2003, the Survivors Network of those Abused by Priests has collected and archived more than 50,000 interviews with more than 90,000 victims. With the interviewees’ permission, each conversation is preserved at the

a 17-year-old girl, forged a head pastor’s signature on a marriage certificate, eloped with her, and then divorced her months later. He was allowed to continue in the priesthood, although officials were aware of his behavior.

While the explanation for their behavior may differ, many pedophiles do share similar characteristics. These individuals usually have a great deal of patience, willing to wait extended periods of time for the right victims—and the opportune moment to interact with them. This is known as the grooming process, which may take several years while building trust in a faith-based community.

In May 2014, Godly Response to Abuse in the Christian Environment (GRACE)—an organization started by Pastor Billy Graham’s grandson Boz Tchividjian—interviewed a convicted pedophile who described the grooming process.

“First of all, you start the grooming process from day one...you find a child you might be attracted to,” the individual said. “For me, it might be no

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likely to have friends and are generally more reserved and withdrawn. Abusers play on victims’ vulnerabilities to build themselves up to a level of significance during the grooming process.

Pedophiles may also choose victims from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds. This allows them to act as a provider for the child, buying them things they want or need. Male abusers also may target children in female-headed households, taking on the role of a surrogate father by inviting the victim to go camping or watch a baseball game.

Predators have also targeted undocumented immigrant families due to a belief that the families would not report them to the authorities. An extensive report in *The LAist* by Aaron Schrank detailed how an immigrant community in southern California was targeted by abusive priests.

Schrank spoke to a legal advocate who explained that “immigrant parishes around Los Angeles have been particularly vulnerable because officials counted on parishioners to keep quiet about abuse, whether because of language barriers, fear that their status as unauthorized immigrants would be disclosed, or deference to clergy.”

This speaks to how pedophiles often choose victims who look to them for leadership or training. For example, a child may look up to a coach, teacher, or scout leader and want to learn from the authority figure. Likewise, a child may look up to a pastor or a priest because the individual is considered holy and being with them may make the child feel closer to God.

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American Folklife Center at the Library of Congress.

Some predators blame their behavior on drugs, alcohol, pornography addiction, or being a victim themselves of sexual abuse. Some, such as Catholic priests, blame their actions on their lifestyle of celibacy. Others blame the victim, saying the victim wanted to be targeted or was a temptation. Some pedophiles profess their love for the victim.

For instance, the Pennsylvania grand jury report shared an incident of one female victim who was targeted by Father Raymond Lukac. He impregnated

body-fat. It had to be a, you know, a nice-looking child.... You maybe look at a kid that doesn’t have a father image at home. You know, you start deducting.”

The individual explained further: “Say if you’ve got a group of 25 kids, you might find nine that are appealing...then you start looking at their family backgrounds. Then you find out which ones are most accessible. Then eventually, you get it down to the one you think is the easiest target, and that’s the one you do.”

Pedophiles often choose victims with low self-esteem because they are less

Part of a pedophile's grooming process involves building trust with the intended victim and his or her family. This can occur in various ways, such as the predator visiting the victim's home, taking the victim on excursions, buying the victim food, or giving the victim gifts. Once they get time alone with the victim, then more devious acts will happen—often starting with simple physical touches like hugs.

Pedophiles will seek out places where they can be with children. They will volunteer to teach, sing, train, transport, or host parties—which are often regular activities at houses of worship. Predators will find ways to attract children to them, such as providing video games, a swimming pool, or pets to play with. This helps isolate children in a seemingly harmless activity, and as they get older, the predator may offer the children drugs, alcohol, or pornography.

Assessing People

To prevent disingenuous individuals from occupying these roles, security professionals can assist houses of worship by getting to know the people who are entrusted with the safety of children.

Security professionals should make an inventory of every position and person within the congregation who has access to children. This list should include individuals who transport and teach children; people who assist in the dining room, gym, and playground; mentors; youth pastors; counselors; clergy; volunteers; and even security personnel.

Workers and volunteers who fill these roles should complete an application to hold them. This application should include information about previous activities with other organizations; a trend toward all activities involving children may be a red flag.

Applicants and volunteers should also sign paperwork agreeing to a background check. Officials should then conduct a national, state, and local record check on anyone who has access to children. They should also contact former and current neighbors and people

SHOULD SEX OFFENDERS ATTEND YOUR PLACE OF WORSHIP?

It is probable that you could have a registered sex offender who wants to attend your house of worship. Generally, registered sex offenders are prohibited from being at a venue where there are children; however, some U.S. states make allowances for them to attend places of worship.

Congregations should decide how they want to proceed by asking the following: Should the offender be prohibited from attending or allowed to attend without contact with children? How will they be prohibited from entering a restroom? What measures are in place to prevent the offender from entering a children's area?

Houses of worship come in all shapes and sizes—some with daily activities; some with daily prayer times and open doors; some offer preschool, kindergarten, and after school activities; and many more possibilities. It is safe to say that every house of worship is different in mission, design, programs, people, and financial resources. Some facilities are uncomfortable with having security at their facility. Yet, this omission is dangerous.

It is not necessary to have uniformed, armed, and badged security in every facility, at all times. Yet, it might be appropriate to have uniformed officers directing traffic while taking a more covert approach to interior security initiatives.

Perhaps you remember having patrols at your elementary school, and there were teachers in the hallway to enforce the rules. Then at some point, schools added lunchroom monitors and bus monitors.

Do the same thing at your house of worship. Find people who are observant, faithful in attendance, and willing to serve a watch. Train them in potential risks. Create a security committee and conduct a risk assessment. Determine what is best for your facility.

who attended other congregations or organizations with applicants.

Once individuals have passed through the background check, houses of worship should rotate staff and volunteers on a regular basis to reduce the potential for predators to develop long-term relationships with victims. Officials can also watch to see if, after rotated, a staff member reaches back for a particular child to be included in his or her new role.

Houses of worship should also work to create a culture that makes children feel comfortable to report suspicious behavior or concerns, like “See Something. Say Something.” Believing children who report incidents is essential; as recorded in the Pennsylvania grand jury report, often when children tell someone in authority about abuse, their reports are brushed off.

Victims generally do not lie about what happened to them. And with child sexual assault, there are typically two types of responses to the abuse: a victim who comes forward immediately or a victim who suppresses the experience only to have it triggered later. Some victims suppress an incident so deeply that they never speak of it. How victims respond often depends on the type of grooming a pedophile used on them.

For example, the predator may tell the victim not to say anything because no one will believe them, that the victim will get into trouble, or that the perpetrator may be hurt by the disclosure.

These tactics place blame and shame on victims already traumatized by trusted religious leaders.

Pedophiles may hold leadership roles within the congregation and have the respect and trust of others, including the victim. This can make it more difficult for spotting predators’ actions because victims could see their abuser’s position as a stamp of approval for their actions.

Additionally, knowing the pedophile is highly regarded in the congregation could prevent victims from coming forward out of fear that no one would believe them.

Procedures and Technology

Houses of worship must have a security plan in place that addresses issues related to pedophiles and sexual predators. They should implement a zero-tolerance policy regarding sexual abuse and require annual training for staff and volunteers on identifying and reporting sexual abuse. The topic should also be discussed with children, who should be encouraged to talk about abuse and report it.

The National Sexual Violence Resource Center has a program available at www.stopitnow.org. It offers free resources to help facilitate discussions on sexual misconduct. It suggests that you discuss boundaries and inappropriate behaviors, including touches, tricks, relationships, and more.

Children should be taught to not have private conversations or excursions with authority figures. Additionally, houses of worship should create rules of engagement, such as the “Rule of Two,” which prevents individual workers or volunteers from being alone with children. Policies should ensure that at least two adults accompany children in hallways or to the bathroom; bathroom breaks should be for the entire class.

Adults should be prohibited from meeting privately with children and required to keep classroom doors open unless there is a window for viewing from inside the building. If an adult breaks this rule, he or she should be replaced.

Policies should also be created to prevent adults from transporting children

in their personal vehicles. Official vans or buses should always have two adults present when transporting children.

Research tells us that sex crimes can occur anywhere. However, they rarely occur in group settings. As security professionals, we know the probable “hot spots” and the steps we must take to reduce the potential for victimization.

One of the greatest deterrents to sexual abuse is an active surveillance camera. Cameras should be installed in classrooms, hallways, ballfields, parking lots, and any places where children will be. The cameras should be recording with time and date stamps, and someone should be actively monitoring them.

Houses of worship should create a retention policy for the footage that allows storing video feed for at least 12 months, even though victims do not generally come forward for a much longer period. Only qualified staff should have access to the camera system, its backups, and servers. A camera policy also should be implemented to prevent anyone from intentionally or accidentally erasing footage.

Finally, when someone comes forward to report an incident of abuse, it is critical for officials to believe their accounts—no matter the time delay between the incident and its report. Victims come forward when they are emotionally able to do so and feel capable of handling the risk of disbelief and rejection from family and friends.

As we work diligently to secure our facilities from outside forces, we must also secure our facilities from the people who are already inside. Pedophiles are among us and await the opportunity to strike. Security professionals can detect and deter them from harming victims. ■

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