# IT COULD HAPPEN HERE

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Strong, macho, go-it-alone, leadership is a breeding ground for all sorts of abuse and should not be a feature of our church life.
**Category:** Observations

This is one of those subjects that I really don't want to talk about; Christian workers sexually abusing those under their care.

I remember back in the 1970s, when I was working in the West of Scotland, one of my colleagues a devout Roman Catholic vehemently saying that a priest could never abuse a child, because priests were holy men, appointed by God. Of course, in the years since, my friend has been proved wrong on numerous counts across the world. Some Protestants, took a slightly perverse pleasure in the problems of the Catholic Church. Ecclesiastic hubris replacing any care or concern for the victims at times. I heard suggestions that things like this were bound to happen with a celibate clergy and - of course - we Protestants would never have these problems.

Except of course, we did. Thirty years ago, John Smyth, an Evangelical Anglican was meting out dreadful abuse to young men (read more here) and in the last week we have seen reports of significant abuse within the Southern Baptist Convention in the USA.

One of the features of the cases that I have mentioned so far is that they occurred within ecclesiastic structures where the perpetrators had people above them who were responsible for their welfare and oversight. However, in each case, the people responsible (bishops or other overseers) failed to take action. In some cases, there was a lamentable lack of intervention and in others dreadful coverups which should not happen in a secular setting, much less in a church one.

Of course, all of these are large denominations, this sort of thing could never happen in the independent churches to which I belong.

The thing is, if we have learned anything from other denominations and groups, then some sort of abuse is almost certainly happening somewhere within the world of independent evangelical churches to which I belong. I hasten to state that I am thinking about the broad eco-system of independent and semi-independent churches, not any particular grouping within the eco-system. In this world, we don't have bishops or any overarching church structures to keep an eye on what leaders are doing in individual church congregations. If abuse is going to be dealt with in our world, then it is co-elders or lay church members who will bear the brunt of the responsibility. It will be incredibly difficult for church members to confront their leaders over issues like this and my suspicion is that the family nature of many of our churches will make it difficult for victims to confront their abusers or to expose the abuse they have suffered to others.

Of course, there may well have been cases of abuse in "my sort of church" that have been dealt with impeccably or that have been covered up - I'm not in a position to know things like that (nor would I want to be). However, the reality is that we simply can't afford to say that it couldn't happen here; it could.

Structures and safeguarding are absolutely vital, but they can only go so far in preventing abuse. They also need to be backed up by a robust culture of vulnerability and accountability within the church leadership. Leaders need secure spaces where they can address their weaknesses and temptations and find support before a problem emerges. They also need to live in a culture where this is seen as the right thing to do. Strong, macho, go-it-alone, leadership is a breeding ground for all sorts of abuse and should not be a feature of our church life.

Let me close with a reminder. Abuse in the church is relatively rare and we need to keep a sense of proportion. However, one case is too many and one victim is too many, so we can't ignore it.