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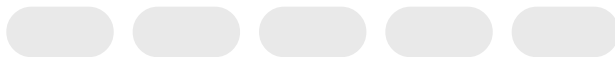
Opinion | The Mormon Church must do more to protect children from sexual abuse

By the [Editorial Board](#)

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A temple of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in Salt Lake City in October 2019. (Rick Bowmer/AP)



If the record of clergy sex abuse of minors in the Catholic Church has imparted a lesson, it is that institutions and individuals have a moral duty, and should have a legal one, to inform law enforcement of reports

that children are being victimized. Somehow, that lesson appears to have been lost in some instances on the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, better known as the Mormon Church or LDS.

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In a disturbing [expose](#) by the Associated Press, a Mormon bishop in Arizona, alarmed that a church member had confessed to raping his own young daughter, contacted the church's 24-7 hotline. The advice he received, from church lawyers, was that he "absolutely can do nothing," and was prohibited by state law from reporting the abuse to police.

That advice was false, and its consequences unspeakable. The daughter's abuse, which her father admitted started when she was 5 years old, continued for another seven years. He also began abusing a second daughter while she was an infant, not even 2 months old — and posted videos of his crimes online. He eventually killed himself after being arrested by federal agents, who received no help from the church.

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The AP investigation, based partly on sealed records, found that the LDS hotline, established more than 25 years ago amid fears that churches faced mounting liability risks from hefty jury awards, can be and has been used, with unknown frequency, as a black box in which reports of sexual abuse have been hidden. A protocol circulated by the church to some hotline staffers advised them to encourage victims or perpetrators to report abuse to authorities, but "never" to offer that guidance to church officials who might call. Only church lawyers could give such instructions, according to the protocol. And while a church lawyer told the AP that "hundreds of reports" of abuse had been conveyed by church officials or lawyers to Arizona authorities, it's unclear how many hotline calls reporting abuse were *not* referred to police or child welfare officials.

In its response, the church insisted it regards abuse as inexcusable, encouraged reporting it to civil authorities and attacked what it called the AP's "oversimplified and incomplete" characterization of church procedures — without providing detail. It also said abusers face discipline within the Mormon Church. Yet an affidavit by a senior church official, obtained by the AP, stressed that the church's disciplinary procedures are subject to "the highest confidentiality

possible,” in order not to compromise abusers’ “willingness to confess and repent.”

In nearly 30 states, clergy are [required](#) to report plausible cases of child abuse to police or state social workers. But Arizona’s law, [like some others](#), also provides a loophole, similar to attorney-client privilege, that allows clergy to withhold information gleaned from spiritual confessions if doing so is deemed “reasonable and necessary” under church doctrine. That gaping — and unjustified — exception was apparently used to justify hushing up the young girl’s rape by her father in Arizona.

Rather than ducking and covering up, the LDS would be wise to seek procedural reforms, erring not on the side of institutional self-preservation but instead prioritizing the protection of the most vulnerable members of its community: children.

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