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 Vigil for mom,  
 child who died  
 in floods will be  
 held Sunday, B2

 Fort Hood will  
 raze site where  
 shootings  
 occurred, B3

## RELIGION

## Child abuse among the faithful

Austin conference will discuss mistreatment of kids in faith enclaves.

By Juan Castillo

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The problems of child sexual abuse in religious organizations remain serious, but more and more, critics are raising awareness about other forms of abuse and neglect occurring in faith communities in the United States.

"While (child sexual abuse) is a really serious problem, it's important that faith communities don't neglect other forms of maltreatment that might be going on," says Janet Heimlich of Austin, founder of the national nonprofit

Child-Friendly Faith Project, which seeks to bring awareness about links between certain religious, spiritual and cultural beliefs and practices that can lead to medical neglect, physical and emotional abuse.

The organization is hosting a conference in Austin on Friday at St. David's Episcopal Church, 301 E. Eighth St., in downtown Austin. Scheduled speakers include whistle-blowers and victims of abuse, and experts in faith, child advocacy and the law.

It's important to have such discussions, said the Rev. Charles Foster Johnson of Fort Worth, a Baptist minister for 32 years who is on the Child-Friendly Faith Project's board of directors.



Janet Heimlich (left) and the Rev. Charles Foster Johnson of the Child-Friendly Faith Project.

"We've learned a sad, tragic thing about child abuse, and that is that often it's inflicted by religious persons, perpetrators that capitalize on the most vulnerable — our children," Johnson said. "As heinous as that is, courageous people of faith are beginning to not only confront this, but

Abuse continued on B3

## Abuse

continued from B1

to mobilize for a more widespread awareness."

Heimlich, a journalist and author of "Breaking Their Will: Shedding Light on Religious Child Maltreatment," said problems where faith practices and traditions cross a line into abuse are widespread. "There is no one faith or one denomination or one religious group that has all the problems, nor are there any that have no problems," she said.

Heimlich and Johnson spoke with the American-Statesman about the upcoming conference and the work of the Child-Friendly Faith Project.

**Statesman:** What are some examples of the kinds of problems your

organization is addressing?

**Heimlich:** There are some places of worship and religious organizations that emphasize child-rearing principles based around semi-authoritarian parenting, (with) a heavy reliance on corporal punishment, and they may be coming up with practices that don't really align themselves with what we understand now to be healthy child development.

And there are issues sometimes with medical neglect, because there can be separatism between faith and community and physicians, and there may be negative ideas about seeking medical care...

There are various forms of emotional maltreatment. One is spurning: Make (the child) feel

## IF YOU GO

For information about registration fees for Friday's Child-Friendly Faith Project Conference at St. David's Episcopal Church, visit [childfriendlyfaith.org](http://childfriendlyfaith.org).

The conference also will be available on a live feed at [www.anymeeting.com/PIID=E959D685824638](http://www.anymeeting.com/PIID=E959D685824638). The cost is \$20.

worthless because you say, 'Because you misbehaved, God doesn't love you.'

**Statesman:** In what situations is abuse more likely to occur?

**Heimlich:** In my research I have found that the most serious problems of child abuse and neglect enabled by ideology and ignorance almost always happen in what I call the ultraconservative communities. Not to say they don't have wonderful individuals raising

kids, but that's where, if there is abuse and neglect, it's more likely it's going to be enabled by some kind of perhaps fear-based religious belief or some kind of authoritarian practice that's often promoted by the religious leaders.

I talk about three perfect storm characteristics of a religious authoritarian community. Where you see these three aspects is where you see the worst problems: a strict social hierarchy,

the membership tends to be a lot more fearful than other communities, and they are socially separatist.

**Statesman:** How do faith communities allow abuse and neglect to continue?

**Heimlich:** In cases where there has been serious, widely perpetrated child abuse and neglect in a faith community, where the ideology of the group is tied to that maltreatment, some people can be on trial and you will have the entire community in the courtroom not for the victim but for the alleged perpetrators. They will justify their treatment of children regardless of what has taken place to the hilt, because they believe so strongly that their belief system is righteous.

**Statesman:** What can faith leaders do to pre-

vent abuse?

**Johnson:** The first thing is to have simply a policy of child protection in the church or synagogue or mosque where workers with children undergo background checks, are never left alone with a child, etc. The second is you need a candid acknowledgment of the vulnerability of a faith community at this point.

Lastly, when someone comes to a faith leader and says they've been abused by an officer or representative of the church, do not engage in denial. ... It's unfortunate and completely unacceptable, but the first response often is to accuse and malign the person who's reporting the abuse.

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