



Wednesday Prayer

20th Sunday after Pentecost – Fact or Fiction?

Then the Pharisees went and plotted to entrap him in what he said. Matthew 22:15

This verse from Sunday's Gospel uses the word "entrap" to describe how the Pharisees were plotting to trick or deceive Jesus in his words about taxes and the Roman empire. Conspiracy theories too, work to trick or deceive people. Let's dispel some myths and conspiracy theories thriving right now on the internet, and identify what *is truly helpful* in ending sexual exploitation and trafficking.

Cherish All Children has supported congregations in preventing child sexual exploitation and trafficking for over 15 years. In this time, significant progress has been made in the movement to protect children and youth, including ground-breaking bipartisan legislation. We've learned there is a great deal we can do together to keep children safe. We learn about the issue, we work to create healthy support systems for young people, we educate children and youth about how to stay safe online and in person, we challenge systemic racism, sexism, heterosexism, and poverty, and we use our voices for policy change. We keep at it, fostering open and honest conversations in families, churches, and communities. And we listen to the experts, organizations like Polaris, which operates the National Human Trafficking Hotline, serving victims and survivors since 2002.

Now, in a year of so much fear, pain and divisiveness – conspiracy theorists are using the power of social media to upend much of this long-term work. QAnon and Save Our Children theories include sensationalized stories of hundreds of thousands of children missing and trafficked through operations by well known political figures, celebrities and retailers. This is not how trafficking occurs. It is harmful to actual survivors and victims seeking support. And it is harmful to the many reputable organizations working to truly end the exploitation and trafficking of children.

Some have asked, "Isn't this raising awareness of the issue so that's a good thing overall?" The short answer is "No" and here are the primary reasons:

- Survivors are re-traumatized for the purposes of sensationalism, political divisiveness, and advertising dollars. "As a survivor, when I see it [QAnon theories], I feel exploited again. I feel like my trauma and the trauma of people like me is being exploited for purposes other than ending trafficking." ~Christy Croft, Survivor & Activist
- Conspiracy theories shared via social media have worldwide reach, harming decades of work that has centered actual survivors' experiences and how we actually combat this crime.
- Critical resources – from law enforcement following baseless claims to the National Human Trafficking Hotline inundated with conspiracy calls – are taken away from the real victims seeking support and the real work to end trafficking.
- And finally, this refuels the "saving" and "rescuing" mentality that centers the "rescuer" rather than empowering and supporting children and youth that are impacted.

Let's work together with thoughtful, committed steps to change the conditions that lead to exploitation and trafficking. Let's be very cautious when reading and forwarding online messaging, making sure our sources on such critical issues are reputable and working in the true best interest of children and youth. #traffickingtruths **God, guide us in truth. Amen.**

Written by Joy McElroy, Cherish All Children Executive Director, and community advocate for racial justice. For more info on this topic, go to <https://polarisproject.org/myths-facts-and-statistics/>