

Make your Church Safe from Child Sexual Abuse

(revised Monthly Mailing article from July 2002 and March 2004)

Hopefully your church will never have to face the financial and emotional devastation of sexual misconduct. Instead of relying on hope and trust, there are a number of proactive steps every church can implement to prevent this activity from ever occurring. As you implement a preventive program, remember that the main objective is to provide a safe and secure environment for the children. In the meantime, you will be reducing the legal risk and liability exposure.

One may have the attitude that it will never happen in my church. Unfortunately, it happens in every denomination, all groups of society in rural and metro areas, regardless of race, education or socioeconomic status. The effects of abuse not only affect the family, but can destroy the trust, credibility, and reputation of the church. Lawsuits could also ruin a church financially. In recent years the Roman Catholic Church of America has paid more than a half a billion dollars in child abuse claims. Insurance companies are recommending screening church staff as the best proactive measure to prevent abuse.

Once the church has addressed the need for a prevention program and understands child sexual abuse and the behavior of profile molesters, it is time to develop a prevention plan. Policies and procedures must be established that provide safeguards against child sexual abuse (sample policies can be found at www.protectmyministry.com/lcms). Four critical areas require attention: selecting and screening workers, worker supervision, state reporting obligations, responding to allegations.

Screening is becoming commonplace in organizations that work with children. The resistance of the past has faded as parents want their children in programs with a commitment to safety. Churches nowadays are being held to the same standards of care as all organizations that work with children. When litigation does occur, juries show no sympathy to church leaders who rely upon "faith and trust" in the care of children. It is never too late for churches to start investing time and effort in making their children safe. Brad Snellings a representative for Protect My Ministry states, "One of the best methods for preventing would be predators from entering your ministry is to require all volunteers and staff to sign a background check authorization form a.k.a. Pre-Screening." A sample background authorization form is available at www.protectmyministry.com/lcms.

A written policy and procedure guide is a second line of defense after screening employees and volunteers. Once established, the policy must be communicated to all staff, and the rules have to be consistently enforced. It often is a good idea to require threshold requirements; for instance require members to attend church for six months before a worker has direct involvement with or supervises children. The purpose is to prevent predators from gaining quick access to potential victims. Develop a process so that you know the motives and character of volunteers before they begin working with children and youth. The goal is not to thwart ministry, but to enhance it through proper safeguards. Another idea is to monitor the proper ratio of adults to children. Require a minimum of two, non-related adults to be present with children at all times. Also, hold all activities for children in a central, highly visible location.

A complete educational strategy provides the foundation for your prevention program. Instruction concerning child sexual abuse and the purpose of the prevention program comprise a critical part of the curriculum. The training of workers makes up the balance.

Risk Management requires a commitment to change. Applying the latest resources brings about positive changes in your church which promotes a safer environment for all your church members, from youngest to oldest.

Some good online resources for the prevention of child abuse are:

+ Brotherhood Mutual Insurance Company (Districts Group Partnership Agreement Company)
www.brotherhoodmutual.com, click on Church Safety & Security or
www.brotherhoodmutual.com/index.cfm/resources/ministry-safety/children-youth/

Recorded Webinar:

www.brotherhoodmutual.com/index.cfm/resources/ministry-safety/webinar/background-screening-webinar/

+ Church Mutual Insurance Company
www.churchmutual.com, click on Safety Resources

+ GuideOne insurance companies
www.guideone.com/center.htm , click on Churches

+ Christian Ministry Resources (www.churchlawtoday.com or www.reducingtherisk.com)
Use this crucial and comprehensive kit to help train your key leaders and staff about thorough volunteer screening and other prevention techniques.

+ The Synod has reviewed several background screening background screening companies and chosen Protect My Ministry as the Preferred Provider for background screening. The Synod negotiated discounted rates, which can be viewed at www.protectmyministry.com/lcms.

