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 (Good Shepherd, Fort Dodge calls it "Safe Sanctuaries)." 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.

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.

Insurance companies are recommending screening church staff as the best proactive measure to prevent abuse. In fact, GuideOne Insurance requires a national criminal background search on all employees and for daycare/preschool/school, overnight activities with minors, counseling or one-on-one mentoring with minors requires either a statewide criminal background search or statewide sexual offender search for all volunteers. Their guidelines do not apply to Sunday school teachers and nursery volunteers. Eric Spacek, the Senior Risk Manager for the GuideOne Center for Risk Management, states, "the majority of incidents we see could be prevented by diligent screening and supervision of those who are involved in the care of the congregation's children and youth. Background searches such as those offered through the program available to LCMS churches are a key piece in preventing incidents of misconduct."

Jeff Hanna, an expert in the field of risk management, says background screening is essential in churches. He states, "Doing background checks and taking other precautions can protect the entire ministry from exposure. Policies and procedures not only protect the children but also help the church defend them should any accusation be made. Jeff Hanna recently wrote an article on the topic in the magazine The Church Report. Complete details can be found online at www.thechurchreport.com/content/view/778/32.

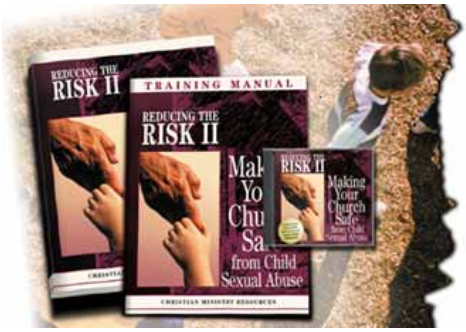
Screening is becoming commonplace in organizations that work with children. The resistance of the past has faded as parents want their children in programs with a commitment to safety. Churches nowadays are being held to the same standards of care as all organizations that work with children. When litigation 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.

Christian Ministry Resources has produced an excellent resource called "Reducing the Risk II" (Making Your Church Safe From Child Sexual Abuse). This material was first published in 1993, and the revised resource kit now offers expanded resources that can be used to assist your training efforts. Use this crucial and comprehensive kit to help train your key leaders and staff about thorough volunteer screening and other prevention techniques.



The Reducing the Risk II kit includes an extensive reference book, training manual, and a DVD/video presentation which can be checked out free at the District Office (or resource kit can be purchased from Christian Ministry Resources for $49.95 with 1 year free online support).

Some good online resources for the prevention of child abuse are:
+ Christian Ministry Resources (www.churchlawtoday.com or www.reducingtherisk.com),
+ Church Mutual & GuideOne insurance companies (www.churchmutual.com, click on Safety Resources link and www.guideone.com/center.htm , click on Churches), and
+ 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.

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