

Baptist & Reflector

Telling the Story of Tennessee Baptists

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On staff, children/youth volunteers

Churches encouraged to get background checks

By Lonnie Wilkey
Baptist and Reflector

BRENTWOOD — The very nature of a church lends itself to being vulnerable to criminal activity and as a result churches need safeguards in place, said a spokesperson for the Tennessee Bureau of Investigation.

“Churches are often vulnerable to criminal activity because the people who work there are generally trusting and want to believe that people have their hearts in the right place,” said Jennifer Johnson, public information officer for the TBI and a member of Long Hollow Baptist Church in Hendersonville.

The TBI is now making background checks available to the general public, including churches, Johnson said.

A background check on a potential staff member or youth or children’s volunteer “is a safeguard” against people who

want to “take advantage of the good nature of Christians,” Johnson said.

The TBI has always maintained statewide criminal history records at its headquarters in Nashville, Johnson explained. Last year the Tennessee Legislature passed a law making that information available to the public, she noted.

Applications for a background check can be obtained at the TBI headquarters or through the TBI web site at www.tbi.state.tn.us, Johnson said. Each background check requires a \$29 processing fee.

Most checks are completed within a week and will only reveal arrests made within the state of Tennessee, Johnson said. “Once the search is complete, you will receive the criminal records or a letter stating that the individual has not been arrested in the state of Tennessee.

In addition to the service provided by TBI there are also private companies that do background searches.

Questions to ask

Regardless of who individuals or churches use, there are questions that should be asked, according to Timothy Beck, information systems manager for TBI.

Among those are:

(1) How do you acquire the criminal history information and from where? “Be careful here because some companies tend to be very vague regarding where their data comes from,” Beck said.

(2) Does the check include arrest records or convictions only?

(3) Will misdemeanors show up or is this search limited to felony records?

(4) Are cross-checks performed against things such as a drivers license, social security

number, current address verification, etc.? If so, is there an additional fee for this?

(5) What is your average response time?

(6) How do you handle common names such as “John Smith?” Are those records researched to make sure we’re getting results on the person in question?

Johnson stressed that “you can never be too careful in this day and age when it comes to your children. This is another measure the church can take to weed out those who may try to slip into a congregation and do ill will.

“I think church members want to know that when they drop their child off with a volunteer or a mother’s day out program that every step has been taken to ensure those volunteers are of good character,” she said.

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"Certainly, I would want to know if they have a criminal record," Johnson added.

TBC perspective

Tennessee Baptist Convention staff members Vicki Hulseley and William Maxwell concur with Johnson.

Maxwell, TBC administrative director, observed that "pedophiles and others who pray on children are coming to churches because every other youth and children's organization have implemented background checks and other protection policies. Often just the practice of conducting background checks will turn away those who have a shady past in this area."

Maxwell also observed that the "need for workers sometimes overrides intuition and common

sense in selecting child care workers."

Maxwell suggested two policies that can help protect churches — the six-month rule and the two-adult rule.

"The six month rule is that no one is allowed to work with children or youth until they have been a member (not just an attendee) of the church for at least six months.

"Most predators will not wait that long and it gives the church an opportunity to get to know the new member well before putting them with minors," Maxwell said.

"The two adult rule states that no adult will ever be alone with a group of children or a single child. This protects both the children and the adults from false accusation," he continued.

"Criminal background checks are an important piece of protecting children and youth in churches. However, it must be combined with training and worker supervision policies and practices to be totally effective."

V i c k i Hulseley, TBC childhood education specialist, observed child sexual abuse seems to be increasingly in the news.

The large number of reported cases of sexual abuse within church facilities or on church sponsored activities has led many church leaders to ask the question, "Could that happen at

our church?"

"I receive calls on a weekly basis from churches asking for help in knowing what steps they need to take to provide a safe and secure environment for every boy and girl who enters the doors of their church.

"The most heart wrenching calls are from pastors or other staff members needing guidance because they

have just discovered that a child has been molested in their church," she said.

"As I do training across our state, I encourage churches to be proactive rather than reactive,"

Hulseley said. "In other words, don't wait until something happens! Preventive measures help to avoid problems down the road. That can be done by implementing policies and procedures and by implementing a screening process for all those who work with minors. That screening should include all volunteers and paid staff. Ministerial staff should set the example by being the first to submit to a background check," she suggested.

Church leaders who need help developing policies, sample volunteer applications, and suggested screening resources can request a packet called "Protecting Tennessee's Children" by calling (615) 371-7905.

Churches may also go to the TBI web site or call Johnson at (615) 744-4087. □



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