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Security in the ‘House of God’ should never be compromised

By Deborah Hertle

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Leaders can help prevent sexual impropriety through careful planning and due diligence.

Like

Imagine the shock of opening your newspaper and seeing the headline, “Youth Minister Jailed,” and discovering this was a staff member at your church. Just the thought of a child predator in a congregation is a fearful concern of pastors.

In recent months our community had several youth ministers and pastors face charges of sexual impropriety: men and women, married with children, mentors and counselors, respected and loved, friends and leaders. The churches were large and small, structured and unstructured, denominational and non-denominational, pastor or elder led. They were accused of raping pre-teen girls, soliciting sex with a young male through the Internet, and molesting adolescents during counseling sessions.

The impact on the child, the family, the church and community is devastating. A child is harmed. Trust is broken. Spiritual lives are impacted. Members leave. Security in the ‘house of God’ is forever changed. Financial losses from lawsuits can run into millions for the church, staff, ministry leader or volunteer. Insurance will not cover the cost if there was a negligent selection of the worker.

Significant legal risk

According to the Church and Tax Law Newsletter, negligence is carelessness or a failure to exercise reasonable care. This is one of the most significant legal risks facing churches today.



Other experts agree. Author Donna Washburn, in *Child Abuse and the Church* warns, “The reality in a study found that 42 percent of alleged child abusers in the church were volunteers, 25 percent were paid staff and clergy, and 25 percent other children. It’s critically important then, for church leadership to be educated on issues of child abuse, have policies and procedures established to deal with an issue, and develop safeguards against abuse in the church.”

“Where risk management is concerned, talk is a great place to start, but action is required. So, once you’ve made your plan, work your plan. Consistency is important,” advises Marlene Wilson of Group Publishing’s *Volunteer Leadership Series*.

Even the most well intentioned church leader finds managing a Child Protection Plan challenging. Leaders are often desperate to fill volunteer roles and will shortcut procedures in order to keep their program functioning.

Getting started

Background screening: Everyone who serves in your church, either paid or unpaid, should be screened. This is done through an application, interview, staff screening, references and a criminal background check for those serving with a vulnerable population such as children, those with special needs or the elderly.

Recruit publicly with a position description and include the requirement for background screening (since this will scare off sexual predators).

Before serving, orientation and training for the position sets clear expectations, boundaries, responsibilities, and establishes supervision. Provide training on child abuse for those working with children and youth.

Document every screening effort. What isn't documented was never done when a question is raised in legal proceedings. Keep files on each volunteer with their ministry application, background reports, references, signed Child Protection Plan, and reviews. When looking at applications look for omissions since this is usually deliberate.

Additional safety measures: Running a criminal background check alone will not guarantee the safety of your church members. The Department of Justice approximates that 90 percent of sexual predators are not in any criminal database.

Two-adult rule: No child is left alone with an adult — ever.

Six-month waiting period: Pedophiles are more likely to go where there is quicker access to potential victims.

Supervise children workers: Youth do not supervise or babysit children without an adult present.

Sexual abuse in the church is a cause that I strongly advocate for because I was a victim when I was molested by my pastor's father-in-law. I was then coerced into keeping quiet or risk being ostracized by my spiritual family. It eventually came out that the perpetrator had attacked many other girls, before and after me, while leaders looked the other way.

Personal experience

I have personally experienced and witnessed the damage sexual abuse in the church does to individuals, families, churches and communities when friends' children and friends of my family were victims.

A church leader allegedly sexually assaulted a three year old when he took her to the bathroom during Sunday school. A preteen boy was sexually assaulted during a youth group outing by an adult youth leader. Teenage boys shared their deepest darkest secrets with a youth leader only to be extorted for sexual favors to maintain their silence. The same leader raped a young teen boy at an over-night prayer meeting. A teen became pregnant by an adult leader who went to jail for statutory rape.

My hat goes off to a church in Vienna, VA. They admitted that they looked the other way when abuse by a staff member was reported. Eventually they took responsibility and publically apologized to the victims, their families and church members.

I also commend a church in Fredericksburg, VA that adhered to the policies of its Child Protection Plan. When a staff member was accused of having raped two pre-teen girls years ago, they were able to assure their congregants that this man had never been alone with a child while in their employ.

Not all churches are so commendable. Many do not take adequate steps to protect their most vulnerable members. Far too often churches wait until after an incident before putting safeguards into place. Consider the benefits of championing a safe ministry environment. A child's life is protected.

A healthy environment builds trust with families, visitors and volunteers. Your legal risk is minimized. You will never have to look back with regrets, wondering if a tragedy could have been prevented.

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Where can you learn more?

The Missing Ministry: Safety, Risk Management and Protecting Your Church by The GuideOne Center for Risk Management (Group Publishing, 2008): Excellent resource for learning the basics on child and youth protection practices.

Protect My Ministry: Online background checks, applications, a screening tracking system, gifts assessments, renewal reminders child abuse training. www.protectmyministry.com

Church Volunteer Central Online background screening, risk assessment, position descriptions and has many volunteer resources available.
www.churchvolunteercentral.com

Lexis Nexis' Church Safety and Safe Hiring Solutions Online background checks and resources.
www.lexisnexis.com/risk/screening

