



Screening Children & Youth Workers

The widespread tragedies of the abuses of children, youth, and vulnerable adults by church employees and volunteers have received massive media coverage over the past decade. These tragedies are not confined within any single denomination or church organization. We can cite known examples involving perpetrators who work in schools, camps, and churches. For us, in the United Methodist Church, we must ask not, “If it happens in our church . . .?”, but, “When it happens in our church, what will we do?” Because child abuse happens every minute of every day, the most important questions for church leaders to answer is, “How must we work to prevent abuse of children, youth, and vulnerable adults in our ministries?”

CHURCHES ARE VULNERABLE

Church schools are vulnerable to potential sexual abuse and other forms of child abuse. Most church sponsored programs rely on a strong and large group of volunteers for leadership. Often, only minimal screening of volunteers occurs. Some of the programs have used teenagers as lead teachers with little, if any, training. Many staff members have not been carefully screened by checking references and having a completed criminal background check.

There is an assumption in the minds of many that church, school, and youth ministry volunteers are only motivated by faith and a desire to serve others; therefore, these folks couldn’t possibly act to harm anyone in their care. Minimal volunteer screening and selection processes along with minimal supervision practices have resulted in violations of the trust given by families to pastors, church, school teachers, coaches, and other church leaders. The consequences are devastating. In the church, or church related ministries, the super enthusiastic welcome that is given to virtually anyone willing to work with children or youth can make for easy access to potential victims for predators.

There can be no doubt about the importance of children and youth in the community of faith. In the Gospel of Luke, Jesus is quoted, saying, “Let the children come to me, and do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs.” John Wesley worked continuously at the inclusion of children and for their blessing by establishing schools and making medical care available for them. As a church, we recognize the importance of educating and caring for children and youth. Sunday School, Vacation Bible School, UMYF meeting, youth choirs, and many other experiences are providing Christian Education and nurture regularly in our communities of faith. Whenever abuse occurs, as a consequence of failed selection procedures or lax supervision practices, we have kept one or many children from growing in faith and discipleship.

Church leaders must use the utmost care in screening the volunteers and employees who will be working with children, youth, and vulnerable adults in our ministries. Recommended best practices include conducting a criminal background check on each applicant/worker, check references and experience of each applicant/worker, and interview each applicant/worker. The best practices for selection also include using written applications for positions that will involve engagement with children, youth, and vulnerable adults. Utilizing these best practices in the selection process is valuable for a variety of reasons. The applications, reference checks, background screening, and interviews give the church multiple opportunities to discover the applicant’s skills and gifts for ministry as well as providing opportunities to discover previous incidents or experiences that would disqualify the applicant from placement within your ministries.

OUR RESOLUTION

The General Conference of the United Methodist Church, in 1996, adopted a resolution to reduce the risk of abuse of children and youth in the church. That commitment by our communities of faith stands today. *SAFE SANCTUARIES: Reducing the Risk of Abuse in the Church for Children and Youth*, by Rev. Joy T. Melton, was developed to assist annual conferences, local churches, and all ministries of the United Methodist Church in developing policies and procedures that will fulfill the purpose of this resolution and enhance our ministries with children, youth, and those who work with them.

The screening and selection of new hires, volunteers, and all staff members is a vital element in your plan for

protecting those your ministries will serve. Some insurance companies implement coverage exclusions and will use such exclusions to deny a claim if the best practice, such as conducting a criminal background check, has not been carried out. Therefore, it is vitally important that your church review its general liability and umbrella policies to be sure they do not include such exclusions. Insurance provided by UNITED METHODIST INSURANCE includes coverages for such claims.

RESOURCES FOR YOU

United Methodist Insurance has partnered with Trak-1 Technology to develop an economical multi-state criminal background check product that is available for your church's use and for use by all the ministries you sponsor. In addition, you may take advantage of the online SAFE SANCTUARIES training for individuals available at Trak-1 Technology. A Spanish language version of the Safe Sanctuaries online training will be launched very soon. For more information, please contact Rev. Joy T. Melton at UNITED METHODIST INSURANCE (phone 770-512-8383) or Chad Stair at Trak-1 Technology (Chad.Stair@trak-1.com).

SCREENING CHECKLISTS

Since screening of staff and volunteers is the key beginning point as you develop your Safe Sanctuaries policies, here are some items to review.

CHECKLISTS FOR ADMINISTRATORS

1. Evaluate current screening/hiring practices for paid and volunteer workers
2. Review all training procedures
3. Adopt and implement in-depth staff supervision practices
4. Document all staff and volunteer personnel practices including hiring, probations, dismissals, incidents
5. Assure that day-to-day practice reflects the written practices/policies.

CHECKLISTS FOR LOCAL CHURCH AND ANNUAL CONFERENCE GROUPS

1. Identify areas of potential problems in advance such as camp procedures and mission trip procedures
2. Develop procedures for response to allegations, incidents, and to known offenders

3. Prepare leaders to work with parents, children, and congregation in the event of an incident.

SAFE SANCTUARIES: Reducing the Risk of Abuse in the Church for Children and Youth, (2008 edition) contains sample forms for Applications, Reference Checks, Interviews, Incident Reports, Local Church Checklists, and Local Church Policies. You may order it through www.UpperRoom.org. You may use these checklists and forms to guide your congregation as it develops and updates its Safe Sanctuaries plans and enhances the ministries with children, youth, and vulnerable adults.

The Ministry Protection Memo (MPM) series is offered as an educational tool in support of United Methodist Insurance's property and casualty insurance program to help you develop loss control and ministry protection procedures. United Methodist Insurance does not, with these MPMs, seek to establish a particular standard of care or to provide legal advice. Church leaders are encouraged to consult competent attorneys with regard to the church's specific needs. United Methodist Insurance encourages reproduction and distribution of this MPM within the United Methodist denomination. Others may contact the United Methodist Insurance Service Center, via telephone at 1-800-975-5442 for permission to reproduce MPM.

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