

 **STAFFING**

Ministry is all about being in relationship—with God, with others, with our self. Relationship invites us to open up and become vulnerable to the person sitting next to us so that we might interact in an authentic and caring way. This is God in expression. This is what the church and ministry strives for. However, if we are physically, mentally or spiritually harmed by a person in “God’s house” representing God’s love to us, then our relationship with the very source of our Being can be severely affected. This restricts our ability to live unlimited and abundant lives. When the person wounded is a child, this breach has far-reaching effects in many lives.

In today’s world, this breach or violation of a child is against the law of the land as well as the law of the heart. Not only will the perpetrator of this crime be found liable but also will the organization that created the conditions for the crime to occur. Most national youth organizations have taken the appropriate steps to reduce their liability of this happening within their personnel, facilities or events. Habitual molesters and pedophiles now gravitate to the organizations that provide access to minors with few or no restrictions to prevent someone from taking advantage.

## Important Considerations for Our Churches

One organization that is easy access is the church, especially smaller churches. Why is this? This is partly because churches traditionally do not want to think that this act of violation would happen on their premises within their membership because their teachings are in opposition to the transgression. Consider the teaching of forgiveness that often is translated to mean that we need to give people second chances. Or consider the teaching to honor someone's call from Spirit. Add to that the church's constant need for youth ministry volunteers and the excitement of having someone volunteer to help you as much as possible. These conditions may lead to a tragedy.

Courts throughout the United States now are taking churches to task and finding them liable for not taking precautions in preventing or reducing the risk of child molestation and abuse. This includes compensatory damages that can be covered by insurance and punitive damages that are not covered. Any church involved in an accusation can find itself on the news, in the paper, and in court.

It doesn't need to be this way. There are steps or best practices a church can utilize that will reduce the risk of injury, harm or danger to every youth in that ministry. Though we cannot prevent all harm to our children and teens, we are responsible in reducing the possibility of it happening in our church. Jesus said it best: "Let the children come to me, do not hinder them; for to such belongs the kingdom of God." (Mark 10:14 RSV) A child's right of safe passage in their spiritual and human development is so important that no matter what size church we serve, we have a responsibility to make it safe for all who enter.

## Resources for Best Practices

First identify the times and places, activities and events, church and non-church groups where children are present in the church. After reviewing the accessibility of the facility and the programming parts of risk management, look at the human factor. Who has access to a child? All volunteer and paid staff who work directly with the children and teens are included in the human factor along with those on the fringes.

It is strongly encouraged that each ministry and director research and study risk management from those organizations that specialize in this area. The Association of Unity Churches International recommends these two online subscriptions that every Unity church with children should subscribe to for at least a year.

1. **Reducing the Risk:** [www.reducingtherisk.com](http://www.reducingtherisk.com)  
Resources include training manuals, CD presentations, and online support to create a comprehensive risk reduction program concerning staffing and volunteers.

2. **Group's Church Volunteer Central:** [shop.grouppublishing.com/cvc](http://shop.grouppublishing.com/cvc)  
Resources include articles, tools, training, forms, ideas, and reduced-rate background checks.

Non-subscription websites to keep current with are:

3. **Church Mutual:** [www.churchmutual.com](http://www.churchmutual.com)  
Safety resources are also available for non-members but members benefit the most from the current research, forms, and recommendations.
4. **Association of Unity Churches International:** [www.unity.org](http://www.unity.org)  
Updates on risk management and recommendations are posted on our Web site [www.unity.org](http://www.unity.org). Click on Services, then Education-Youth. Click on For Adults Serving Youth.

You can also go online and check with youth organizations like scouts and the YMCA to see what they have available.

## Screening

All persons, whether volunteer or paid, who will be working with children and teens need to be screened before having access to the youth. You are responsible for the people serving your children and there are no shortcuts to this part of risk management.

**Pre-Screening:** Be sure to use a written application (Application Youth Ministry Volunteer, Chapter 19) and job description for each position you wish to fill. Through this procedure, the applicant knows what the responsibilities of the work are and what qualifications they must meet to apply. As a pre-screening device, the job description outlines the age requirement and the length of active participation within the ministry.

It is recommended that sponsors for teens be 25 years or older, and that persons are 21 years or older to serve in the nursery and children's ministry. Younger people can certainly assist or be junior sponsors but this is beyond the two adults required. If the volunteer or staffer is required to drive, they must be 25 years or older no matter what age they are working with.

It is recommended that an applicant have attended the church regularly (two or more Sundays per month) for at least six months before that person can apply for working with the children. For teen ministry, it is strongly encouraged that an individual have attended regularly for no less than a year. Some Unity churches require membership or completion of basic Unity classes like Lessons in Truth or Unity 101 before a person can teach in youth ministry.

If either the age or attendance requirement is not met, the person should be redirected to another area of volunteering until the time that they do qualify for youth ministry.

**Application Considerations:** An effective way to obtain needed information and to treat volunteers and staff uniformly is to require all potential candidates to complete an application that includes questions on various aspects of the youth ministry. For current volunteers, you can ask them to update the church's records by completing the new form.

This application can include questions regarding previous volunteer experience, spiritual gifts they have to offer, abuse and other criminal offense questions as well as what motivates the person to want to volunteer in youth ministry. Be sure the form includes a liability release to sign and a background check authorization form. A good model for this is available in Chapter 19 "Forms." See Application Youth Ministry Volunteer and Background Check forms. Take time now to compare this to your present application.

Once the application is filled out, it is essential to check the personal references listed on the application and then interview the applicant. You must show that in good faith you followed up on the information provided to you to assure the well-being of the children placed in this person's care. For more information about screening and interviewing, see Chapter 13 "Volunteer Team Building."

In summary, screening involves providing the volunteer applicant with a job description, having them fill out an application form, checking the personal references given on the application, conducting a face-to-face interview, and instigating a background check. When that process is finished and the person is cleared to work with your children or teens, the next step is training.

**Sensitive questions:** Some forms also include the question, "Were you a victim of abuse as a child? If so, have you had any counseling?" This is a sensitive issue and one that many people would rather not ask. The reasons for asking for this information, however, are valid. If an adult is vulnerable in this area it could show up as an inability to detect signs of abuse with a child in class. Or it might show up as hyper-vigilance where there is an increased watchfulness and intensity to looking for and reacting to signs that could be interpreted as abuse. There may also be the possibility of this person being an abuser. If the abuse has not been addressed or if there is still shame attached to it, knowing this will help the director understand the individual during times when the vulnerability factor is high. As always, this information is confidential and kept in a locked file. Each church will have to prayerfully ask itself if this is an important piece in protecting the children and if so, whether they wish to address it on the form or in the interview.

## TRAINING

Training is required for any volunteer and staff member that has been approved to work in the youth ministry department. Training helps the person be successful in fulfilling their job responsibilities. It gives them the tools, skills, and information they need to function within the guidelines and policies of the youth ministry department and the greater church community. In order to adhere to policies, procedures and best practices, one must know them up front with plenty of time to ask questions and find out where everything is. On-going training is also recommended for those who have been working for awhile to refresh memories and update paperwork. The director also benefits by checking to see if the paperwork still reflects the actual practice and vice versa. Chapter 14 “Volunteer Training and Recognition” discusses training needs for volunteers and provides guidance in planning training.

Important to risk management is training on how volunteers and staff are to conduct themselves—their words, actions and reactions. Provide thorough training on all aspects of the Policy and Procedure Handbook that impact Youth and Family Ministry at an initial training for new volunteers and staff, either individually or as a group.

The director or other agent chosen by the minister is also responsible for supervising volunteers and staff who serve in youth ministry to make sure all the policies, procedures and principles are followed. Supervising means providing on-going education and training plus monitoring the effectiveness of the staff, guidelines and systems when incidents come up. It includes sitting in on classes to support and encourage volunteers and to model best practices that may help the volunteer be more successful.

## REPORTING

When an allegation of abuse is made within the church, you must know what steps to take and when to take them. Reporting is governed by law and is determined by the state in which the church is located. (If your city is in a bi- or tri-state area do the research for each state. Allegations of abuse or neglect are to be reported in the state in which it occurred, so if you receive information that one of your children has been abused in their home or neighborhood, and they live in the other state, you need to know what to do.) Be sure to update your information on a yearly basis.

Create a reporting procedure *before* you need it. Follow the recommendations in the prior paragraph and go online to your state’s child protection Web site. Check with your insurance agent for any packets, forms, and guidelines they have for reducing the risk in your church. Then check with your lawyer to see if your procedural plan is legally correct.

The following response steps are from Chapter 10, “Responding to Allegations of Abuse” in *Reducing the Risk II: Making Your Church Safe from Child Sexual Abuse*, Christian Ministry Resources. There you will find much more detailed explanations and guidance.

**Remember that churches can no longer defend themselves from liability by saying that they didn’t know what was required of them. The information is out there and you are responsible for knowing and following it. All of the below information should be included as a part of a policy/procedure handbook.**

- **What constitutes child abuse in your state?**

Both federal and state laws establish definitions of child abuse and neglect, but each state defines what is and isn’t covered by law in that state. Be sure you are clear about this as it is your first step to determining whether or not you report.

- **Who is legally responsible for reporting?**

Learn who is considered a mandated reporter in your state. Most of the time professional groups such as teachers, social workers, and health care workers are mandated reporters. But in some states all individuals are considered responsible reporters. Find out if reporters can delegate reporting to a supervisor and whether they are still responsible if the supervisor does not make the report. Check to see whether your state lists clergy as mandatory reporters and whether privileged communication is covered. A line of reporting must be established within the church so all suspicions and concerns go to the director first and then to the minister.

Designate a church leader (position not person) to which allegations or suspicions can be brought and whose job it is to make sure state law and church policy is followed by having the mandated reporter contact the proper authorities. The senior minister has to be informed before such a report is made. The senior minister can then decide on whether to contact the designated church spokesperson and the board of trustees. Remember that only the people who have a need to know should be included in this line of reporting. Confidentiality is supremely important.

The only exception is if the minister is the suspected perpetrator. Then a second person, perhaps the board president, would be the designated church authority and holder of information. All staff needs to be trained in the reporting procedure.

- **What is the time frame for reporting before one is in violation of the law?**

Here again, this varies from state to state. If you have a reporting procedure in place, you will not waste time trying to figure out what to do.

- **Which agency do you call to report?**

Every state lists their agencies and contact numbers. It may include an 800 number or a 24-hour hotline. If there is a number for anonymous reporting and you choose this option, be sure to have a second independent person (like the minister or youth director) with the reporter at the time the call is placed. This provides a witness to the fact that the call was made and made in good faith.

- **Who do you contact if the child is in immediate danger?**

If a child's life is endangered and you believe that releasing the child from your custody could be life-threatening, call 911. The police are trained to handle these situations and can keep the child safe while everything is worked out. Of course, if you see a child being abused you must step in at that moment, stop the abuse, remove the child from the perpetrator's presence and influence, and call 911.

- **What is the penalty for failure to report?**

This can include anything from a monetary fine to jail time.

- **Is the reporter protected under the “good faith” reporting practices?**

Most volunteers are protected under some type of “good faith” reporting, meaning that a report was made in good faith and not maliciously with intent to harm.

## **RESPONDING TO ALLEGATIONS**

Take all allegations seriously. If a child confides in you, realize that a child rarely lies about sexual abuse. Know the symptoms and signs of abuse and neglect for those instances when a child is unable to confide with a “safe” person. Do not take it upon yourself to determine if the allegation is true or not—a professional can better handle that part.

- **Provide a caring response and support.**

Treating the allegation as serious goes a long way in insuring the child and family that you care for their well-being and will not tolerate any of this behavior in your church. Keep your energy calm and your heart open to help the child and family move through this difficult time. Do not express dismay, anger or disbelief. Keep your responses supportive and non-accusatory. Let the child/family know that the church has a procedure to follow and all the steps will be taken. With your words and your manner, express the church's ongoing support and care for them during this difficult time. Do not refute or deny any accusations or blame anyone, especially the victim or victim's family. Reassure the family that the church takes allegations seriously, will take the steps to report it to the legal authorities, and that the church seeks to support the child and family through this difficult time.

- **Document the allegation.**

Fill out an Incident/Accident Report Form. (See Chapter 19.) This is not an investigation but a gathering of information that you will need to report the allegation or suspicion to the proper authorities.

An Incident/Accident Report Form includes this information:

- Name, age and gender of child
- Address, phone number of child
- Description of suspected abuse or neglect, date of event and location
- Current condition of the child
- Name of person who is witness to abuse; when information is shared
- Name of person who is reporting; date of report

- **Seek professional assistance.**

Confidentiality is a must, so only those who have a need to know should be informed. These include your insurance company or the church attorney. If you have any questions, contact the Children's Ministry Coordinator at the Association of Unity Churches International (816-524-7414).

- **Fulfill state reporting obligations.**

If you have answered the questions about reporting in your state, you know what you legally need to report, when to report, and who does the reporting. Create a checklist to make sure that all the steps for reporting in your state are taken.

- **Decide on options regarding the alleged perpetrator.**

If the person works, volunteers or attends the ministry, you may choose to restrict their participation at the church, denying them access to any youth program or location where youth are located. You may also deny them any church participation until the investigation is completed; or you may suspend employment until the allegations have been investigated. If the person works directly with children, they are denied any access to anyone under the age of 18 whether before, during or after church services or events.

- **Respond to congregational concerns.**

Each case will be different so you will have to decide *if* something needs to be shared, then when and with whom. This includes speaking with the board, the staff or the congregation. What doesn't change is a person's right to privacy and protection from defamation. This includes the victim and the alleged perpetrator. Please consult your church lawyer or other professional for the limits of what you can share and with whom.

- **Respond to media.**

Designate a spokesperson to handle all the communication to the media. No one else should speak for the church or about the church or say anything about the allegation except the designated person. Have a prepared statement that has been reviewed by the church's attorney before releasing it.

It is very helpful to communicate the church's stance on child abuse and what steps have been taken to prevent and report. This strong document is created while putting your Policy and Procedure Handbook together. It states three things: that the church will not tolerate abuse, molestation, sexual misconduct in any way, shape, or form; that the church has taken steps, such as (give examples), to prevent this behavior; and that the church has a reporting procedure in place which will be followed in strict concordance with the law. A complete policy handbook is available at the church office.

Once the report is made, then the church must be faithful in prayer—to hold to the truth that God is in the midst of all of this, embracing both the victim and the alleged perpetrator, their families, the church and the community in love, healing and the right outworking for all concerned. The church must be faithful in continued support to the child and family, while being available to the ongoing investigation.

- **Maintain strict confidentiality in all of the above.**

There are those who will need to know—the director and minister—but no information should be given to any other party. If the state authorities become involved, cooperate with their requests. (You may want to contact your church’s lawyer.)