



Screening Church Leadership

Introduction

Until recent years, churches had not often faced litigation for negligence concerning child molestation related to volunteers or employees. However, today church leaders find themselves as defendants in litigation cases. Plaintiffs allege that the church and its leadership did little or nothing to screen ministers or church workers prior to employment as a minister or enlistment to serve as a volunteer.

The risk to the local church today is too high NOT to take all of the precautions necessary and rely on the data available to prevent an abuse situation.

In the 1996 resource "Selecting and Screening Church Volunteers," by Christian Ministry Resources, six points of impact on the church for negligence in selecting leaders were indicated.

1. **The trauma to the victim of sexual misconduct.** The church is not immune to the risk and when it does occur, the shock and anger intensifies when it is learned that church leaders did not avail themselves to information and resources to prevent the crisis.
2. **The emotional and spiritual impact on the congregation.** These result first in disbelief, which later gives way to shock, anger, and disillusionment. The trust level between church staff and congregation is affected and the trust level among congregational membership is affected. This can divide or split a congregation and sometimes the congregation never recovers.
3. **The negative news media coverage.** The church congregation becomes embarrassed to admit where they attend and often relocate or transfer their membership to other churches. Loss in membership and financial support weakens the congregation.
4. **The stress of litigations and investigation process.** The depositions, the amount of business conference time and energy takes its toll on the staff and congregation.
5. **The financial cost.** Litigation costs for sexual misconduct is among the most costly trials/settlements of all tort activity. The amount of attorney costs and testifying result in major ministry funding being spent in defense/settlement of a claim.
6. **The personal impact on church leaders.** Not only is the church leader system accused of failure to exercise reasonable care in the selection of the alleged perpetrator, but that the selection process was reckless resulting in a claim of gross negligence.

Screening does help the church! Screening is the “filter” to allow continued care, teaching, and ministry to take place. Screening is a tool to help end the anxiety and speculation involved with hiring or enlisting persons to serve. Churches must show due diligence to protect all participants.

Implementing a Screening Program

The most challenging part of a screening program is first implementation. There has to be a beginning to a process. Many of our church Preschool, Children, and Youth leaders have been enlisted and serving for years. How do we start? Do we ever “grandfather” the veterans? The answer: set a date to have all screenings done and screen everyone. It’s the fair and safe process. In fact, many of the veteran leaders in your church programs who understand the logic for having screenings of volunteers in the future will usually step up to be first. Once they are screened, they can be the best source of encouragement for others to follow through. Communication and follow through is one key.

A screening process is not a one-time process; it is continual. Here are some important factors to remember to keep the process going and viable to the organization.

1. It needs support of the organization and its leadership. Everyone knows and approves of its worth and safety to the entire church, from the Personnel Committee to the Preschool Committee.
2. To help continue the screening process, there must be a system in place so all new volunteers and employees receive screening forms, prior to the point of enlistment or employment.
3. Continue to educate and train volunteers and employees of the serious nature of their leadership with children and youth. The congregation must understand the importance of the process and be assured it is working.
4. For screening to be effective there must be accountability. While paid staff (employees) screening is better controlled – screening volunteer workers can be difficult at times to administrate. Identification tags are a good quick reference for accountability. If you are screened, have an identification tag – showing you can work/volunteer. If you have not been screened you don’t volunteer – even “in a pinch”. All volunteer workers must be accountable to each other to help the system work without error.

Screening paid staff (employees) is done prior to employment. An accountability process is important throughout the employment term. An added accountability effort at time of employment would be to obtain reference permission, from employee candidates, of prior employers and other churches or charities with which the person has been previously employed or associated. A form required at time of employment giving the new employer permission to review past employment can be as simple as a release form giving that permission by the new employee. Making this form a requirement for employment will serve as another means of screening a new employee.

Keeping Records

Information gathered in the screening process for employees or volunteers is to be considered highly confidential. A church can be brought into litigation if they fail to contain documentation and it is intentionally, or inadvertently, accessed by persons without proper authorization.

A church should maintain the files in two filing sources. One, employee screening, and two, volunteer screening.

- **Employee Screening** records should only be available to assigned individuals, the Chairperson of the Personnel Committees, and immediate supervisor.
- **Volunteer Screening** records should only be available to the assigned individuals and be administered by a policy of accountability.

All files should be well marked as “confidential” – and indicated who has authority to open the file. All confidential files should be stored in a locked cabinet. It is good accountability to have at least two persons, authorized to jointly access the files when research is needed. All screening files of employees should be retained in a locked file indefinitely even after resignation, retirement, or death. These should be sealed. For applicants who were never hired their screening files should be held for a period of three years and destroyed.

Volunteer screening files need to be kept indefinitely. All information should be retained in a sealed confidential file. It would be best that a list of all screened volunteers be kept as a reference without having to go back through the files each time they are enlisted. Files kept on volunteers who were denied enlistment to a position should be kept absolutely confidential or reviewed by the Senior Pastor and age group coordinator and kept in a locked file.

Screening is a very important administrative process that requires dialogue and continued accountability by a number of church leaders. It must be continued from year to year. All volunteers and new employees must be screened to keep the system consistent and secure the credibility of the church.

References

Selecting & Screening Church Workers, Church Law & Tax Report, James Cobble & Richard Hammar, Christian Ministry Resources, Matthews NC 1996 Pgs. 7, 57, 63
Risk Management Handbook for Churches & Schools, James Cobble and Richard Hammar, Christian Ministry Resources, Matthews NC, 2001 pgs. 119-124, 264

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