



CREATING SAFE CONGREGATION POLICY

*The greater the involvement of individuals in creating the policy,
the greater the ownership.*

The greater the ownership, the greater the success of implementing the policy.

In spite of years of media attention on abuse within the church, surprisingly few congregations have written guidelines for keeping their children safe and responding to allegations of possible harm. Yet the steps for developing effective policies are relatively simple (and the cost of inaction high).

1. Create a vision statement
2. Research various policies
3. Determine the specific implications of the vision
4. Draft a policy for approval

First, never create a policy until the congregation has agreed on the ultimate goal against which each detail of the future policy will be weighed. Such a vision statement may become the policy's introductory paragraph. One church affirmed its commitment "to being a safe and nurturing church environment for all people." Another declared it was "unequivocally opposed to all forms of violence that may occur on a personal level between one human being and another." Another only wants to focus on the protection of minors, not necessarily vulnerable adults.

Once the congregation approves the foundational vision, the ad hoc policy creation committee can collect samples from other congregations and judicatories, the Internet, or professional risk management groups. Every congregational setting is unique, so carefully consider before borrowing another policy outright.

Remember that the church probably already has some safety practices already and other safe church guidelines can be put into place immediately, even before a policy has been created, so that the church will be a safer place for vulnerable individuals and for volunteers. Beginning new safe church practices prior to the formal adoption of a policy allows volunteers time to test out and get used to new rules that will be more strictly enforced once the policy is in place.

Then the real debate begins. What level of screening is appropriate? Is fingerprinting necessary? Will a two-adult rule (two adults for every youth activity) apply while driving to an event? Should windows be installed in all doors? May adults drink alcohol if responsible for children? In considering the optimal child protection strategy, every congregation faces a unique setting and membership, and must be wary of simply borrowing another congregation's policy without careful consideration.

As the committee creates its draft policy, it should think both holistically and in line-by-line detail, aware of implications of each decision as well as the overall tone. Does the policy accomplish the original vision? After such diligent work, presenting the proposed policy to the governing body may require a good sense of humor and patience. Rather than experiencing questions as challenge, the committee can relish the presentation as an educational opportunity. The more the governing body and congregation understand and value the policy, the more likely its effective implementation will be in protecting children.

However, the policy development is not over. Laws change, congregations change. A review process should be established to regularly examine the policy to insure its greatest success.