



CREATING SAFE CONGREGATION POLICY

God's first words to Moses on Mount Sinai included, "build me a sanctuary, that I may dwell among you." (Exodus 25:8) Building a *sanctuary* for God to dwell among us is no easier now than it was for those early Hebrews.

Protecting *sanctuary* usually relies on a personal safety policy for congregation workers and members. Though an ad hoc committee may be assigned to write a policy, its ultimate success depends on the entire community's understanding and supporting the concept and dynamics of *sanctuary*. Just as it takes a whole village to raise a child, it takes a whole community to promote *sanctuary*.

In many congregations, the Governing Board begins the process by recommending an addition to their bylaws similar to:

In recognition of the spiritual and public trust given to this faith community, the ___ Congregation is committed to being a true sanctuary, both nurturing and protecting its members and visitors. Worship of God requires openness, trust, intimacy, vulnerability and a safe supportive community. Abuse and harassment are, therefore, violations of the faith shared by this congregation. Accordingly, the congregation will maintain official policies and procedures which assure prevention of future instances of abuse, appropriate intervention into alleged incidence of abusive behavior, and care for all involved. These procedures will be reviewed by the (governing body) annually to correspond to changes in civil law and the congregation.

Because a bylaw change requires vote by the whole congregation, the vote in itself promotes education, implementation and support of *sanctuary*.

When the whole faith community emphasizes *sanctuary* for its staff and members, the ad hoc policy design committee works with more inspiration. Their task should include *comprehensive* guidelines for congregational safety in relationships, including prevention and intervention of (1) clergy sexual misconduct, (2) child and elder/dependent adult abuse, and (3) sexual harassment. Though policies may be borrowed from other congregations or the denomination, each congregational policy must be tailored to the understanding of *sanctuary* in that setting and the relevant laws for that state.

The Personnel Committee concentrates on developing, updating and implementing the personal policy and procedure manuals. The manual should describe the recruiting, screening, and selection of both volunteer and paid staff -- with a sample application form, reference contact form, and necessary procedures and precautions to take in the selection process. The manual should also require that all paid and volunteer staff have job descriptions and signed contracts or agreements concerning

the expectations of both the individual and the congregation. The manual should also assure adequate training and supervision of staff and include guidelines for behavior, evaluation procedure, disciplinary policy and maintenance of confidential personnel files.

To facilitate an understanding of *sanctuary*, the Religious Education Committee plans educational opportunities for adults and children on issues related to personal safety and healthy relationships. These may include classes as wide-ranging as handling anger, child abuse prevention or curbing codependency. The pastors include *sanctuary* topics in pastoral prayers, newsletter articles, and sermons. The Peace and Justice committee or the Outreach and Mission Boards might focus for a while on domestic violence shelters, violations of human rights, children in violent environments and other such concerns.

Among its many decisions, the committee weighs the benefits of forming a standing Congregational Response Team (CRT), which can be activated by the governing board if a concern or complaint of abusive behavior needs addressing. (Please contact Kyros for more information on how such teams function.) In selecting a specific intervention strategy, the committee must restrain the congregation's tendency to keep secrets and sweep rumors and complaints "under the rug" where they tend to smolder and blow up later. The policy must clarify the limitations of open information for the congregation and confidentiality, based on congregation and denominational practice and relevant state law.

For the vision of sanctuary to thrive and the policy to be effectively implemented, an ongoing Safe Church Committee needs to be developed. Its function is oversight of the policy requirements, including training workshops, and review of the policy annually. No policy is perfect and finished—every policy will need repeated updating to accommodate changes in the law, complications of putting the policy into practice, and improved clarity. A policy is a living document!