

Child Sexual Abuse Prevention, Policies, and Training for Ministries: Two Effective Approaches

**Theresa Lynn Sidebotham
Telios Law PLLC**

Preventing child abuse, particularly child sexual abuse, should be a top concern for churches and ministries, given the tragic effects on children and the ethical and moral responsibility of an organization that works with children to care for those children. The most important reason to address these issues is that abuse can wreck children's lives and cause effects going on into adulthood. Children, spouses, and families of victims also suffer. In addition, the impact of the child sexual abuse scandal on Catholic and other churches shows that an organization's life can be nasty, brutish and short when it is hit by major litigation.

Sometimes organizations can feel overwhelmed with the complexity and expense of the undertaking. They must institute good policies and procedure, screen and train staff and volunteers, run investigations where necessary, and deal with possible legal complications. One of the hardest moments in an organization's life is handling the crisis of a report of child sexual abuse. How well the investigation is carried out will affect healing for victims, victim's families, siblings, spouses, and friends. It can also impact the future of the organization, in terms of spiritual health and possible litigation.

As an attorney who advises religious organizations in this area, I can confirm that designing a program from the ground up can be fabulously expensive, though that pales compared to the emotional, personal, and financial cost to victims and membership of just one incident. Fortunately, there are ways to control financial costs, as excellent resources exist. Here are two that I consider premier.

MinistrySafe

A resource available for all religious organizations is MinistrySafe, founded by Gregory Love and Kim Norris, two attorneys with a nationwide sexual abuse litigation practice. They took their experience and designed a complete online system at www.ministrysafe.com. While it is possible to take the training as a single individual, the strength of their system is that it provides a way to train a large and constantly changing staff and volunteer roster on a rolling basis.

Love and Norris provide the trainings. The cost-effective approach is to use the online training videos. One set takes administrators through setting up the ministry's safety system. Staff and volunteers also work through a video training program. Love and Norris do conduct live trainings as well, usually for very large organizations.

Next, MinistrySafe provides policies, procedures, and forms that can be used by ministries. These may need to be adjusted for your situation, but that is much more cost-effective than drafting from scratch.

A unique feature of MinistrySafe is the control panel. This addresses the ever-present problem of when and how to complete all necessary steps for constantly-changing personnel. (And from a legal liability point of view, it is even worse to have a system that isn't implemented correctly than not to have a system.) MinistrySafe's control panel is an online grid that lets the organization sign up staff and volunteers by department. The grid shows when personnel have completed training as well as the required renewal date. It also shows whether the following steps have been completed: background check; application; references check; and interview. Not until all steps are checked does the program approve the staff or volunteer person as trained and ready to go.

Child Safety and Protection Network

The CSPN resource is available only for mission organizations and international Christian schools that are members. At present, around 49 mission organizations are members at one of three levels, and it is growing all the time, as CSPN is a multi-agency effort to proactively prevent child abuse as well as respond to any current or historic reports of child abuse. Member organizations participate in annual conferences and information-sharing.

CSPN provides Best Practice Standards to help mission agencies develop child safety standards on written policies and procedures, screening, training, a code of conduct for staff and volunteers, response to reports of abuse, and follow up care for children affected. While member organizations are free to develop their own policies consistent with CSPN standards, the website provides a number of sample policy documents.

A unique strength of CSPN is the Investigative Team Training course, which I was recently able to take (as I happen to be a member of Mission to Unreached Peoples). The training course lasted four days. It is an in-depth, hands-on walk through an investigation, with both lecture instruction and role play. Incredibly valuable are the sample documents and forms that provide a template for addressing every stage of the investigation and every type of interview, as well as outcomes. In addition, the agencies involved commit to bringing in at least one member of each investigative team from an outside agency, to provide an impartial and objective approach.

Moving Forward

In a world where child abuse is a sobering reality, and child sexual abuse statistics are frightening in both secular and religious settings, churches and ministries have an obligation to the children they serve to have good policies, screen and train personnel, and address investigations effectively. Most effective is for trained ministry staff to work with legal counsel who has expertise in the area to select and implement a program. But with excellent existing templates, the cost can be modest and the results excellent.