Giving Our Best for God’s Children

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**Question – Why is our Church now requiring its children and youth ministries volunteers to undergo criminal background screening and training in child abuse awareness and prevention? I’ve volunteered and worked with children for over twenty years and now my character is being questioned?**

Adventist Risk Management is often asked this question and it deserves an answer to help alleviate fears amongst our dedicated volunteers who give faithfully of their time and talents. As members of the Seventh-day Adventist Church we must always guard three scared trusts:

1. Our moral responsibility to protect Children from harm at all times.
2. The responsibility owed to faithful adult volunteers in ministry to properly equip them for service.
3. To uphold and protect the integrity and mission of the Seventh-day Adventist Church.

First, we all have a biblical mandate to protect children from harm. “Then Jesus called for the children and said to the disciples, “Let the children come to me. Don’t stop them! For the Kingdom of God belongs to those who are like these children.” Not only did Jesus invite the children to come, he also provided a stern warning to anyone who would harm one of these precious children. “But if you cause one of these little ones who trusts in me to fall into sin, it would be better for you to have a large millstone tied around your neck and be drowned in the depths of the sea.” Unfortunately, today’s society suffers from an epidemic of child abuse; 1 in 3 girls and 1 in 5 boys will be sexually abused before they reach the age of eighteen. Child sexual abuse is an abuse of power over a child or teen and a betrayal of trust. In 85% of sexual abuse situations children and teens are sexually abused by someone they know and trust. This means all congregations must be on guard constantly to protect our children and teenagers from the harm and emotional scars that abuse can cause for a lifetime.

**Best Practices in Ministry**

Adults set the example for children and establish the reputation of your church in the community. As we minister to children they experience the love Jesus has for each of them. This loving experience creates the reputation your congregation has in its community. Your church becomes a beacon that says – “Children will experience Jesus here; parents you can trust us to safely care for your child as they participate in our ministries”.

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1. Matthew 11:25
2. Matthew 18:6
Sadly, adults who have a propensity to prey on and harm children look for opportunities to easily become involved in these kinds of well-meaning but unguarded churches. When these individuals are successful, your children are at risk and your church’s mission can easily be jeopardized. Recent studies conducted by clinical psychologist, Dr. Anna Salter have produced troubling findings that the faith community is even more vulnerable to abuse than secular environments. Sexual abusers within the faith based communities often have more victims and younger victims. Quoting from a convicted child molester – “I consider church people easy to fool... they have a trust that comes from being Christians. They tend to be better folks all around and seem to want to believe in the good that exists in people.”

Over the last fifteen years many denominations have established best practice safeguards to protect children under their care from harm. Best practices for child protection have been implemented in nearly 60% of the churches in America’s faith based community. In 2010, the Seventh-day Adventist Church joined this movement to adopt safe practices to protect children from harm and train adults how to appropriately affirm children as they interact with them in ministry. These safeguards are found in both the Church Manual and NAD Working Policies. The reason for these requirements is not a lack of trust in our faithful adult volunteers. They are instituted because we value all the children and adults in our congregation supremely. Church leadership must always understand the sacred duty we have to guard our church family from harm and uphold the mission of trust we bring to the community.

The Gatekeeper

Today, the faith-based community has adopted three best practices in a child protection program. These elements become the gatekeeper for the safety of children at your church.

- Six Month Introduction Period
- Criminal Background Screening
- Awareness Training
Each element supports the three-fold Gatekeeper goals of your child protection program:

1. Our church will get to know the adults who desire to work with our children.
2. Our congregation believes that child safety is of paramount importance and as adult volunteers we will set the example by personally submitting to a criminal background check.
3. Our congregation likewise acknowledges its duty to properly train and equip adult volunteers so they know how to properly affirm children and respond if an allegation of abuse occurs.

The integrity of the congregation’s child protection program rests on the example the current church ministries leaders and volunteers embrace. It is very difficult to establish a creditable child protection plan if the requirements are only applied to new members who want to volunteer. Allegations of favoritism or discrimination can quickly undermine the program when “why me and not him” questions arise. These challenges are easily addressed when the congregation can honestly say – We value our children and all adult volunteers in our children and youth ministries have voluntarily undergone the same screening and training program. This sends a clear and strong message – the protection of both our children and adults is of paramount importance at this church.

Protecting Adult Volunteers

As a church we must know the adults who we ask to work in children and youth ministry. By using a six month rule, the local congregation has the opportunity to meet and observe the individuals who wish to volunteer their time and talents in ministry. During these six months, ministry leaders get to know the individual’s personality and become acquainted with their talents. You can also share the vision the church has for ministry and mission to see if the volunteer is willing to support these values. Adults intent on grooming and abusing a child often tend to stay clear from organizations utilizing the six month rule and criminal background screening. They do not want to go through any kind of screening process nor be limited in having direct access to children. By not rushing individuals into positions of trust, it allows time for proper screening and orientation to take place which can prevent many misunderstandings or problems in the future.

Adventist churches also have a duty to train the adults who work with children and youth in proper conduct and child abuse awareness. Adults who work with children often have either a moral or legal duty to report suspected situations where a child may be a victim of abuse to law enforcement or child protection services. It is critical for all volunteers to know and understand the reporting laws of their jurisdiction.

Adults also need to understand how to appropriately interact with children and teenagers at all times. It is unreasonable to assume that adults will know the code of conduct that will be expected of them during ministry activities at your church. For this reason the North American Division and Adventist Risk Management have prepared a series of child protection resources that your church can use to conduct training and provide orientation for the volunteer’s duties. Nothing can harm a volunteer’s personal reputation faster that a false allegation of inappropriate conduct with a child. Take time to provide child abuse awareness training and orientation so the adult volunteer clearly understands their duties and your ministry’s expectations of conduct.

As adults we must always take to heart the biblical counsel: “The integrity of the upright guides them, but the unfaithful are destroyed by their duplicity.” It is a privilege and sacred trust when we volunteer to work with children. Congregations must always be watchful in guarding our church from those who may harm our children. Jesus reminds us, “understand this, that if the owner of a house had known when the robber was coming, he would have been watching. He would not have allowed his
By undertaking these best practices in child protection the church acknowledges its sacred trust in protecting our children, adults and mission. Thank you for your service and commitment to protect all of God’s children, both young and old from harm.

Endnotes:

i Luke 18:16 – New Living Translation
ii Matthew 18: 6 – New Living Translation
iii http://theadvocacycenter.org/adv_abuse.html
vi SDA Church Manual Statements
vii NAD Working Policy Statements
ix Proverbs 11:3 – New International Version