

Skills-Based Volunteers in Congregations: Developing Safety Policy

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Abstract

Despite frequent headlines about child maltreatment in religious settings, many faith-based organizations have not adopted formal policies to prevent the abuse of children and vulnerable adults. As congregations seek to establish policies for safe environments, they may find tremendous assets in volunteers with professional training in areas such as education, personnel management, and criminal justice. One congregation recruited a work group of volunteers with such professional knowledge and experience to address risk management issues. Skills-based volunteers are an asset to the congregation for the important work of developing safety policies. In a congregation of about 400 members, eight skilled volunteer who had 287 combined years of professional experiences, accepted the challenge to create a safer environment in their congregation. This article describes the need to develop child protection policies in faith-based organizations and guidelines for developing a child protection policy. The authors provide clear policies to prevent maltreatment, respond to allegations, fulfill the mission of the faith community, and involve skills-based volunteers effectively. The skills-based volunteers used their collective expertise to develop and implement a safety policy to help protect youth and vulnerable adults when those populations cannot protect themselves.

Key Words:

volunteers, faith-based, risk management, policy, youth, vulnerable adults

Introduction

“Historically, the church has opened its doors to all. It follows therefore, that people with a whole range of life experiences are coming into its buildings week by week, including those who abuse children” (Churches Child Protection

Advisory Service, 2005, p. 1).

Congregations generally exhibit a high degree of trust in their participants, relying on the members and leaders to conduct themselves according to high ethical standards. “Sometimes this trusting attitude persists even in the face of questions or

reports of misconduct” (Melton, 2008, p. 64). During the past 10 years the media have repeatedly exposed instances of trusted adults in faith-based communities abusing and/or maltreating children or vulnerable adults. Unfortunately, a high proportion of those who abuse children within the church have been found to have been members, or even congregational leaders, for years prior to the revelation of inappropriate behavior (Churches Child Protection Advisory Service, 2005).

Given the nature of their ministries, congregations routinely promote close personal relationships among paid staff, volunteers, and youth. Such relationships may occur without the organization providing sufficient education for workers to understand healthy and appropriate interpersonal boundaries with youth (Melton, 2008). As congregations plan to provide education and establish policies for safer environments, volunteers with professional training and experience in areas such as education, human relationships, risk management, personnel management, social services, law, technology, and criminal justice, may serve as important assets.

The history of faith communities, their culture of trust, and the lack of adequate safeguards in congregations can create an environment that gives predators easy access to especially vulnerable populations, such as youth, the elderly, and individuals with disabilities.

The Problem

According to testimony provided to the U.S. Senate (Boyce, 2008) an estimated 905,000 children were victims of abuse or neglect in 2006, and approximately 1,500 children die annually as a result. Such violence against children happens in many places including faith based communities. A study by the John Jay College of Criminal

Justice in New York reported 4,392 plausible claims of childhood sexual abuse by priests or deacons in the American Catholic Church between 1950 and 2002 (Gibbons, 2008). Further, in its annual report of sexual abuse claims, the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops revealed 635 new allegations in 2006, which was nine percent fewer than the previous year (Gibbons). Insurance companies share related data for Protestant churches. During the past 10 years, Church Mutual, the company insuring the majority of Protestant churches, reported about 100 sexual abuse cases a year involving minors and congregational staff or volunteers (Gibbons). Two smaller insurance companies reported respectively “an average of 160 reports of sexual abuse against minors every year for the past two decades” and “an average of 73 reports of child sex abuse [or] other sexual misconduct every year for the last 15 years” (Gibbons, p. 21).

Child maltreatment is under-recognized in most faith based organizations because the structure for reporting issues is lacking, and therefore increases the difficulty in assessing and reporting the extent of the problem. “Protestant ... denominations are less centralized than the Catholic Church...[and] many churches are independent, making reporting ... harder” (Gibbons, p. 21). Undoubtedly, many instances of abuse go unreported, so overall statistics are difficult to confirm.

Another reason that child abuse in religious settings has been under-recognized is because the concept of charitable immunity has shielded religious organizations from litigation. It was common practice that society provided immunity from lawsuits to religious communities that were viewed as providing charitable services. “In other words, congregations were protected from lawsuits

because their value to society as a whole was seen to be more important than any individual's possible claims of injury" (Melton, 2008, p. 65). This appraisal no longer serves to protect institutions in cases of abuse or sexual misconduct. Now, the public and the courts consider that the harm done by abuse of youth or children is too great to go unreported and unpunished. Today, punishment may come in the form of incarceration as well as monetary damages awarded in verdicts against the perpetrator and/or the institution in which the victim was mistreated. Damage awards have ranged from thousands to many millions of dollars (Melton).

Congregations have not sufficiently discouraged child maltreatment. "Churches are famously passive, and even inactive, when it comes to screening the volunteers and/or employees who work with youth. Often, no investigation is done at all before total strangers are welcomed aboard as new volunteer(s)" (Melton, 2008, p. 64). Some religious communities in the past have chosen to forgive repentant perpetrators and reassign them to another role in the congregation, perhaps failing to understand that abusers tend to continue their misconduct.

Concern for children, however, along with public scrutiny, is challenging more faith based communities to create policies and structures by which to screen, select, educate and guide staff and volunteers who work with children. Prevention policies are being established in congregations throughout the United States and around the world in countries such as Australia, Canada, New Zealand, and the United Kingdom. In 2007, America's largest Protestant group, the Southern Baptist Convention pursued another level of protection by taking a vote "to study the feasibility of establishing a database of

Southern Baptist clergy and church staff who are credibly accused of, have confessed to, or were convicted of sexual abuse or harassment" (Gibbons, 2008, p. 22).

Still, when faith-based organizations consider risk prevention policies they report emotional reactions from their congregants (Melton, 2008). Examples of comments include, "I am trustworthy. Why do I have to prove it?"; "Why do I need to keep the doors open at all times when I am with children?"; "Why do you screen my worthiness through a background check?"; and, "We've never done it this way before."

Skilled Volunteers

Defined broadly, "skilled or skills-based volunteering is the practice of using work-related knowledge and expertise in a volunteer opportunity" (Ellis, 2009, p. 3). More specifically, the term skills-based volunteering refers to "engagements done on behalf of a nonprofit or public agency without charge ... where volunteers perform work similar to what they do at their places of employment, or for which they have received professional training" (Warshaw, 2009, p. 4).

Faith-based organizations can benefit from skilled volunteers who understand that there is a great likelihood (i.e., 90% or greater) that a child is abused by someone known by the victim; that most sexual molesters psychologically manipulate children and adult gatekeepers (e.g., parents, teachers, chaperones) prior to attempting abuse; and, that very few (less than 10 percent) of all sexual predators will ever encounter the criminal justice system (Norris, 2009a). A skills-based volunteer typically focuses on strategic decision-making and sustainability of the organization rather than on direct service to people (Warshaw, 2009).

The concept of volunteers applying their professional expertise in not-for-profit organizations is not new but one that has gained momentum recently as various summits and national campaigns have explored the potential of intentionally and strategically applying corporate skills in the nonprofit world (Ellis, 2009). While this does not assume that all nonprofits lack professional staff, it does assume that many nonprofits do not have sufficient staff with expertise to accomplish specific tasks, such as developing a child protection policy.

Research has shown that individuals are motivated to volunteer for reasons such as personal growth or achievement, group affiliation, or community influence. Warshaw (2009) proposes that skills-based volunteers are motivated to serve because they may:

- have attained a certain status and now want to volunteer for an organization's cause by applying their professional knowledge to address management problems in new arenas;
- have a newly-minted degree and are anxious to test their knowledge and ability in service to a cause in which they believe;
- have technical skills which may not be found elsewhere in the nonprofit organization; and/or
- be social entrepreneurs who want to innovate new ways of addressing an issue.

Recently, Nelson (2007) applied social exchange theory to survey data collected from 562 Baptist volunteers in Virginia. He found that skills-based volunteers consider it a fair exchange to contribute time and energy for roles that engage their expertise, and more specifically that "Through engaging in meaningful work, [skilled volunteers] broadened their

knowledge and developed their creative potential" (p. 108). He also found that skilled volunteers were comfortable with the talents they could offer in religious settings, but were most "concerned with the fit between their interests and the church ... goals" (p. 111). As congregations seek to establish policies for safe environments, they may find tremendous assets in volunteers with professional training and experience in areas such as education, human relationships, risk management, personnel management, social services, law and criminal justice, and secure technology.

An Example of Skills-Based Volunteers in One Congregation

In this case study, skilled volunteers were members of a work group who were asked to develop a congregational policy to prevent, mitigate, and respond to the maltreatment of children. The eight volunteer members of the work group were currently in or retired from a professional position, and all were associated with the congregation in the case study (see Table 1). Four held doctoral degrees, three master degrees, and one a bachelor's degree. They had 287 combined years of experience relevant to the emerging safety policy. The four women and four men were all over age 50. All were deeply committed to keeping children, families, volunteers, paid staff, and the organization's reputation safe. They were also committed to ministering to all persons who use the congregation's services. These volunteers demonstrated great loyalty to this work. Their attendance at meetings once or twice a month, over the 22 month period, was nearly perfect.

Safety Policies

Hamilton (2006) delineated ten items to include in a safety policy to prevent child abuse in congregations. His

recommendations are a combination of policies, procedures, education, and communication. Specifically, he suggests that faith-based organizations need to: (1) establish a written position statement with definitions; (2) adopt the “two adult” rule for youth supervision; (3) keep classrooms welcoming and open to visitors; (4) ask every paid or volunteer staff member to complete an application; (5) check reference(s) listed on application; (6) conduct a national criminal background check on every applicant; (7) interview each paid or volunteer applicant; (8) establish an identification system for non-guardian adults to transport youth; (9) comply with the state’s child abuse reporting statute; and (10) keep clergy and congregational leadership informed. Each of these elements was included in the new policy for the congregation in the case study.

Additionally, Melton (2008) recommended that child protection policies for faith-based organizations include: (1) appropriate interpersonal boundaries; (2) statements for appropriate use of technology; (3) an adult behavior code; (4) open design elements in facilities (e.g., windows in doors); (5) sufficient ratio of adult supervision to youth participants during activities; (6) limited private counseling roles; (7) education for parents, families, teachers, and supervisors, and (8) adequate insurance. Again, all of these elements were included in the congregation’s safety policy in the case study discussed here.

Effective implementation of a safety policy requires education for all stakeholders. The Abuse Prevention Systems (Norris, 2009b) recommends a five-part training system for volunteers and staff: (1) explanation of safety principles and their relationship to statistics; (2) methods for volunteer selection and screening; (3) how

to conduct criminal background checks and use that data effectively; (4) specific actions and behaviors expected of volunteers and staff as a result of safe environment policies; and (5) details about how the policy is managed effectively. Each of the five elements was included in the training provided for staff and volunteers in the case study.

When developing a safety policy, Churches Child Protection Advisory Service (2005) recommends that the congregation asks the following critical questions:

- Is there anyone in our organization able to identify possible signs or symptoms of abuse?
- Could a child seek help in our organization, if s/he were being mistreated?
- What would we do if a child said s/he was being abused?
- Would we respond differently if the allegation was against a member, employee, volunteer, or stranger?
- Do our policies help address these matters?
- Do we have a responsibility to bring these issues to the broader faith community?

The volunteer work group spent considerable time discussing these questions and incorporating processes to address each one in the emerging policy for this congregation.

Policy Development

The volunteer work group recommended that any staff member or potential volunteer would be subject to the requirements of the congregation’s safety policy if that individual interacted with children or vulnerable adults three or more times during a year, or if they supervised one overnight stay. Now the policy affected

a number of volunteers in the congregation and emotions were heightened.

Developing a safety policy was also time-consuming for this committed group of skills-based volunteers. The process spanned nearly a two-year period (see Table 2). The commitment led to intense, but respectful debates among members of the work group regarding the philosophy, specific terms, and even punctuation chosen to define the policy.

Decisions made by the volunteer work group were based on information from existing congregational policies, a review of model policies from national and regional denominational affiliates, and the volunteers' professional knowledge and experience with risk management policies established by schools, work sites, the 4-H Youth Development Program, Boy Scouts, social network guidelines, criminal justice systems, and insurance companies.

At several points during the policy development, volunteers found that they were at odds with one or more paid staff members. Each time, the skills-based volunteers used the situation as an opportunity to communicate, invite input, and seek balance by weighing their professional knowledge with their understanding of this faith-based organization.

According to Warshaw (2009), highly skilled volunteer assignments are most likely to be in one of two areas of work: improving operations through tangible products or increasing organizational capacity. In this case study, the volunteer work group accepted both areas of responsibility during the process of developing a safety policy. First, they improved organizational operations by developing a policy handbook that included applications, forms, and interview procedures. Figure 1 summarizes the

elements developed to implement the safety policy. Second, they planned and conducted education for key ministry stakeholders, the administrative council, and the congregation to enhance overall organizational capacity. Warshaw also identified four stages, in which to engage skilled volunteers in capacity building assignments in a not-for-profit organization. The stages are: (1) assessment, (2) planning, (3) engagement, and (4) evaluation. This volunteer work group engaged in each of the four stages as the safety policy was developed and implemented.

Conclusion

The history of faith based communities, their trusting culture, and the lack of adequate safeguards has created an environment that can give predators easy access to especially vulnerable populations within congregations. Yet, developing a safety policy to protect children and vulnerable adults in places of worship often creates other challenges.

This case study described how skills-based volunteers were engaged when a congregation was faced with a safety concern that was difficult, time-consuming, and emotionally charged. Skills-based volunteers were willing to commit time and expert knowledge to address it. They developed a policy statement, an application and selection process, a system for criminal background checks, guidelines for file management, and provided education for congregational members.

While personal commitment is required for any volunteer work, greater commitment is needed to successfully traverse a controversial task such as creating policy for protecting children and vulnerable adults in a faith-based community. Skilled volunteers are likely to be committed when

they accept an invitation to apply their expertise for a cause of their choice.

Warshaw (2009) reminded us that organizations can benefit from highly skilled volunteers if “boards, management teams, staff members and current volunteers work collaboratively” (p. 4). In one community, skilled volunteers helped a faith-based organization achieve their goal to protect those who cannot protect themselves.

Implications

Congregations can, first, fully acknowledge that all volunteers bring skills to their role in a not-for-profit organization, and then recruit skilled volunteers to address specific needs such as creating and implementing safety policies for youth and vulnerable adults. All faith-based organizations may engage skilled volunteers by:

- purposefully identifying and recording the range of skills that each congregant brings to the organization, both expert skills gained through one’s professional training and other expertise nurtured through interests, hobbies, and life experience;
- cultivating relationships with highly-skilled volunteers who may be interested in sharing their education, qualifications, and reputation;
- recruiting and selecting volunteers with appropriate expertise to serve in difficult assignments; and
- inviting skills-based volunteers to assist with in-depth, but short assignments.

Specifically, when engaging skilled volunteers in developing safety policies, faith-based organizations may:

- encourage individual volunteers to communicate openly, independently, and respectfully;

- encourage group problem-solving;
- be prepared for professional disagreement and debate within the group;
- strive for decision-making by consensus;
- find ways to communicate the qualifications of skilled volunteers to stakeholders;
- provide technology to document group work that may require frequent editing; and
- provide a budget to implement the necessary aspects of an organizational safety policy.

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Table 1

Experience of Skills-Based Volunteers Developing Safety Policy in Case Study

Volunteer	Education/Discipline	Professional Responsibilities	Years
A	Engineering, Administration	Dean, university professor, officer in the National Collegiate Athletic Association	40 years
B	Theology	Credentialed church leader, pastor	29 years
C	Adult Education, Volunteer Program Management	University assistant professor, 4-H volunteer resource manager, risk manager	34 years
D	Photographics, Macintosh Certification	Science photographer, technology use consultant	14 years
E	Human Development and Family Sciences, Special Education	Teacher, administrator, program director, university professor	38 years
F	Education	Elementary teacher, administrator, principal	41 years
G	Chemistry, Process Engineering, Industrial Management	Chemist, industrial manager, educator, administrator	51 years
H	Public Administration, Education, Theology	Criminal justice officer, pastor	40 years

Table 2

Timeline for Developing and Implementing a Safety Policy in Case Study

Timeframe	Process	Individuals Involved
September 2008	Interim clergy requested review of existing risk management policies	Interim pastor, work group, Congregational Council
September-October 2008	Work group met 2-4 hours monthly, researched current policies developed for this congregation; discussed implications of the policy	Work group, interim pastor
October-November 2008	Researched policies developed by other congregations	Work group, interim pastor
December 2008-January 2009	Drafted statement but rejected it as inadequate	Work group, interim pastor
February-August 2009	Started over, debating every word and phrase	Work group
September 2009	Obtained locked file space (safe, file cabinet); began assessing the facility and making structural changes to address safety concerns	Congregational Council, work group
October 2009-February 2010	Arranged demonstrations and secured a national database through which to conduct criminal background checks	Work group
January-February 2010	Reviewed and approved draft of policy	Congregational Council
March 2010	Added details and continued to edit policy	Work group
March-April 2010	Planned education for key stakeholders, volunteers, and congregation	Work group with input from staff
March-April 2010	Took additional steps to create a safe physical environment in facility (e.g., added windows to doors)	Work group
April 2010	Conducted training about policy for staff and volunteers in congregation	Work group members and clergy facilitated learning with all staff and key volunteers
April-May 2010	Trained select individuals to conduct criminal background checks using the national database	Facilitated by a national database representative for staff and members of work group
April 2010	Introduced full policy to congregation in newsletter; scheduled group information session	Congregational members
May 2010	Posted policy on Wiki site and bulletin board	Congregational members
May-June 2010	Implemented policy at all levels	Congregational Council, staff, and related committees

Figure 1. Resources Developed to Support Safety Policy

- Policy handbook outlining and defining details for the safety policy
- Application to volunteer with children and vulnerable adults in the congregation
- Application for a staff position
- Form and process to obtain three personal references
- Form listing questions and documenting interview process
- Form to authorization permission to conduct a criminal background check
- Guidelines for collecting, filing and maintaining private records
- Form to report alleged incident of abuse
- Form listing guidelines and participation agreement for a registered sex offender to be monitored in congregational life