

Why Employment Background Checks are Essential

By Todd Rhoades of ChurchStaffing.com

Probably all of us have heard the horror stories of fallen pastors and churches that need to deal with a case of sexual immorality, molestation, or financial impropriety. Just take a look at these cases pulled from newspaper headlines in just the last two weeks:

- A pastor from Louisiana was arrested and booked with molesting two children who attend his church
- A Kentucky pastor was arrested after allegedly of exposing himself to an undercover officer
- A South Carolina church youth volunteer pleaded guilty to two child pornography charges
- A church custodian in Michigan was found to have been videotaping children in three different bathrooms of the church.

There is probably one thing in common at each of these churches: They all felt that something like this could never ever happen to them. It used to be commonly held that a pastor or church staff member would be the last person in the world for whom you would need to run a background check. Unfortunately, news headlines of the past couple years have shown this to be totally untrue. When you are hiring a pastor or staff member, most legal advisors and denominational officials are recommending a complete background check to insure that there is no past record or activity that could bring embarrassment to your church and the cause of Christ. Background checks are quickly becoming standard procedure, and your church should strongly consider conducting a routine background checks before completing your employment contract.

Sexual misconduct is one of the main areas that you'll want to guard your church against. If you are the person at your church in charge of hiring staff or training volunteer workers, you'll want to do everything in your power to be sure that your leaders and volunteers will not intentionally harm anyone at your church. If there is criminal activity, it can dramatically impact the life of the child, the church and its leaders. Dr. James Cobble, Jr. from ChurchLawToday.com identifies six key problems that an incident of sexual misconduct can bring upon churches and ministries:

1. **TRAUMA TO THE VICTIMS.** The trauma is not limited to the person (usually a child or teenage minor) who is the victim. There is also trauma to the family of the victims. This deep violation is the kind of heartache and mental and emotional anguish that can literally last a lifetime.

2. **SPIRITUAL IMPACT ON THE CONGREGATION.** The first reaction is one of sincere disbelief. Dr. Cobble says that "About one-fifth of the time, when the sexual misconduct involves children, multiple victims are present. Not only does this significantly increase the likelihood of litigation, but other parents within the church become concerned that their own children may be victims. Congregations become divided. Some members cannot believe the allegation. Some insist on forgiveness and restoration of the offender. Others seek justice, accountability and protection. Intense discord can surface lasting for months and even years. Some congregations never fully recover."

3. **NEGATIVE NEWS COVERAGE.** It is a certainty that your local press will pick up on a sensational story of this type. Local newspapers and radio/television stations will bring a nightmare of publicity to your church and ministry.

4. **THE STRESS OF LITIGATION AND INVESTIGATION.** In most cases, sexual molestation cases are investigated at the local AND state levels. You'll need to deal with social workers, police detectives, legal representatives, depositions and more.

5. **THE BOTTOM LINE FINANCIAL COST.** If there is a legal decision against your pastor or church staff member, the settlement cost to your church could be very large. There may also be

an added effect of decreased giving by your local congregation during a time unprecedented conflict.

6. THE PERSONAL IMPACT ON YOUR CHURCH. Finally, you cannot discount the stress emotionally on your church leaders who need to bring you through this time of turmoil.

These high-cost items demand that each church come up with a strategy to guard against possible sexual or criminal activity among one of your staff or volunteer leaders. One key part of your strategy should be to run a screening or background check on any individual that is either a paid staff member of your church; or who works with minors. If your church currently has no screening policy, it is imperative that your leadership moves quickly to protect your church's reputation and the lives and innocence of your children.

Two of the biggest questions are "What searches should be included for an effective screening program?" and "Who should we screen?" Here are some general suggestions that we hope will serve as a starting point in your screening planning and strategy:

Children's Ministry Staff/Volunteers

You should consider running a national criminal and sexual offender search, a statewide criminal search, and a county criminal search (if not available at the state level). You should also consider checking the Sex/Child Abuse Registry, and do a Motor Vehicle Registration report if the person(s) will be driving or transporting anyone from your church. In some cases, as drug screening test may also be required.

Entry Level Non-Pastoral Paid Staff Member

For non-ordained or pastoral staff, you should screen for Social Security Number verification, Criminal record, and MVR (Motor Vehicle Records) if this person will be driving during the job. You'll also want to check with their previous employers, check their personal references, and, in some instances, perform a drug screening.

Pastoral Staff Members

For ordained and/or pastoral staff, you should screen for Social Security Number identification, Nationwide, State, and County criminal record, and MVR (Motor Vehicle Records). You'll also want to check with their previous church employment record, their ordination or denominational credentials, check their personal references, and, in some instances, perform a drug screening.

Current Ministry Staff

If no prior check has been completed or is on-file, you should consider running a Social Security Number verification (or Credit Report on employees handling valuables), Nationwide, State and County criminal Record, Sex/Child Abuse Registry, and an MVR (Motor Vehicle Records) report.

Periodic Checks

In addition, a regularly scheduled check of a staff person's driving record or credit report may also protect you by bringing up any red flags. New reports may reveal changes in behavior that might require some corrective action or attention.

Many churches have been reluctant to aggressively perform background checks because of the time and cost involved. But this is no longer valid reasoning. The cost of background checks is insignificant compared to the damage that can come from one bad incident. And the time needed to conduct background checks should not be an issue as well. It just takes a couple forms and a signature to run background checks in most states.

Just because you think it can't happen to you doesn't mean it won't. Now is the time to protect your church. And with a internet connection, you can start right now. Here are some websites that work specifically with churches in the area of background and screening checks:

www.ChurchWorkerScreening.com
www.ChurchVolunteerCentral.com
www.ScreenChurchStaff.com

Take the first step today in protecting your children, your staff, your church and your community. It will give you the protection and peace of mind of knowing you're watching out for those you're entrusted to care for!