



Caring Well Hiring Guide

HIRING STEPS TO KEEP YOUR CHURCH SAFE

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A church in Vermont hired a pastor who had in a previous ministry exploited a teenage girl, plead guilty to charges of exploitation, and served a year in prison. As a pastoral applicant, he wasn't asked about his past, and he didn't share the information.¹ An elder at the church explained the church saw no need to request a criminal background check or to call references, which they typically did for other job candidates. The pastoral candidate in question had attended their church. The congregation felt they knew him, and he was also the chair of the pastoral search committee, making it easy to shape the questions in the application process to conceal his past. This news story demonstrates the need for churches to hire staff and to select volunteers well to protect their congregations against predators.

Many churches want to hire well to prevent abuse in their churches, but are unsure where to begin. How can you develop hiring policies to better protect your most vulnerable members? What steps should be taken to screen staff or volunteers effectively? The purpose of this guide is to help you get started! While there are principles that apply to every church or ministry, each church will have to consider their specific context to best implement effective policies and procedures. There is no one-size-fits-all approach to making a church a safer place for children. This guide is designed to provide a starting point for church leaders who are working to implement effective hiring and screening policies to help prevent future abuse.

This guide will lay out the basic principles to consider and questions to ask as you build or evaluate your own processes for hiring and volunteer placement decisions. Although each congregation should work with professionals to determine the best course of action for their unique setting, this guide is a starting point for church leaders on what to consider when recruiting, screening, and hiring staff or

¹ Elizabeth Murray and April McCullum, "Church hired pastor without checking his criminal record — then said it didn't matter" *Burlington Free Press*, January 17, 2019, <https://www.burlingtonfreepress.com/story/news/local/2019/01/17/vermont-church-hired-pastor-who-pleaded-guilty-to-crimes-against-child/2241240002/>.

volunteers. Whether you are reviewing existing policies or creating them for the first time, this guide will walk you through practical steps to hire well.²

Learn more about other policies and procedures to help your church be safe for survivors and safe from abuse by reading [The Introductory Guide to Caring Well](#), a free resource created to provide a foundation of topics to think through, sample language and policies provided by leading sexual abuse prevention advocates, and links to further resources to help you dive deeper into each area of prevention and care.

While the church has no control over the evil intent of the perpetrator, the church does have control over its ministry areas, how they operate, and who is eligible to serve in those ministries. The church must do everything in her power to lower the risk of sexual abuse and assault.

SAMANTHA KILPATRICK, ATTORNEY AND FORMER PROSECUTOR

Creating a screening framework

The first step is to have a methodical process to recruit and screen employees and volunteers for suitability of service and compatibility with the church's values and sexual abuse protection policies. This is especially important within child-and-youth-serving ministries.

A hurried, frantic search and recruitment of employees or volunteers to fill spots and have the right numbers can place children and youth in danger. An unhurried, methodical process of hiring and recruiting allows the church to properly vet, get to know, and get a feel for a person and whether he or she is a fit for a particular ministry. Hiring or selecting volunteers must include a process and the time to evaluate the applicant and to discover any potential red flags. With this in mind, look at the hiring and recruitment process as an opportunity for the ministry to get to know the applicant, as well as for the applicant to get acquainted with the ministry. Good policy and best practices around hiring and recruitment of employees and volunteers will lower risk and increase safety for children and youth within your church.

² Much of the material in this guide was included and adapted with permission from a series of articles by Samantha Kilpatrick at erlc.com entitled "How to Create Child Protection Policies." You can read the full series [here](#). The content of the series of posts was provided for general informational purposes only and may not reflect the current law in your jurisdiction. No information contained in the posts or this document should be construed as legal advice. Employment laws vary from state to state. Please consult with an employment attorney in your area to review the language of your application, reference check, and interview questions in order to ensure that your practices do not violate the laws of your state.

Faye Scott, 24-Year Veteran Children’s Minister, First Baptist New Orleans

Careful deliberation and preparation of policies and procedures designed to safeguard our children has proven invaluable as we recruit, plan, and implement activities within our church. Every volunteer who works with minors through our church (off-campus activities included) is required to participate in a **safety certification process** which involves viewing videos related to the prevention of child sexual abuse in the church, completion of a volunteer application form and references, and a criminal background check. The process is **repeated every three years** for volunteers and lay leaders alike.

Enforcing the policies has **allowed leadership to block individuals with questionable backgrounds** from serving with minors. Clearly stated policies allowed these decisions to be made objectively rather than subjectively. Each person undergoes the same process, and the same set of standards is applied to each applicant. The process helps to provide a buffer between our children and those desiring to harm them. Having policies in place ahead of time ensures that a plan can be safely carried out by persons whom we know are prepared.

Although enforcement of such policies is costly in time and money, **no value can be placed upon the life of a child**. The church must be a safe place where individuals can be trusted. Trust is a critical component of salvation. The bottom line is this: As ministry leaders, we must earn the trust of those in our care so that we can earn the right to share the gospel message of Jesus Christ.

Once your hiring policies and procedures are established, it is crucial that all of your ministries follow the processes put in place. The process should be used for all applicants and not just for some of the applicants. If the process is not realistic, consider revising your policies. It is imperative that your policies and practices match.

*Policy is not something that is created and sits on a shelf.
Policy is your guide and what you live by, not what you
aspire to, but what you actually do—it is who you are.*

SAMANTHA KILPATRICK, ATTORNEY AND FORMER PROSECUTOR

Some of the things churches should consider as they implement a screening process for employees and volunteers are:

- [Written applications](#)
- [Background checks](#)
- [Reference checks](#)
- [Internet Check](#)
- [Interviews](#)
- [Orientation and training](#)

Written application

A written application allows you to gain a lot of information in an efficient manner. The application should have all of the standard types of questions, but there are key areas to cover in evaluating employees and volunteers from a child protection perspective.

Some suggested questions your written applications could include are as follows:³

- Please provide a short written testimony including what the Lord has done in your life up to this point.
- What Christian accountability do you have in your life?
- How long have you been attending the church?
- Are you in agreement with the church's statement of faith? If not, explain.
- Why do you wish to serve in this role?
- Please list all experience you have working with children/youth. Include any paid positions, babysitting, volunteer positions, summer jobs, camps, or church work. Please provide start date, reason for leaving, position and responsibilities, supervisor, and contact information.
- Have you ever been suspended, asked to leave, or fired from a job? Please explain.
- Have you ever been suspended or expelled from high school or college? Please explain. (for youth & young adult workers)
- Have you ever abused alcohol or drugs? If yes, please explain.
- Have you ever been convicted of a crime? Please list dates and nature of offense. Answering "yes" to this question does not automatically disqualify you from service.
- Have you ever been arrested for, charged with, convicted of, or pled guilty or no contest to a crime? If yes, please fully explain with dates and nature of the offense. Answering "yes" to this question does not automatically disqualify you from service.
- Have you ever been accused of hurting or abusing a child?
- Have you ever participated in or been accused of abuse or sexual misconduct, including but not limited to conduct involving physical abuse, rape, sexual assault, sexual abuse, or child pornography? If yes, please explain.
- Have ever been named as a defendant in a civil lawsuit involving allegations of abuse, including but not limited to conduct involving physical abuse, rape, sexual assault, sexual abuse, or child pornography? If yes, please explain fully.
- Have you ever been asked to step down from a position of leadership in a church? Please explain time frame and details.
- Describe an area where you need improvement or is challenging for you in working with children or youth.
- Are you aware of any traits or tendencies you possess that could pose any threat to children, youth, or adults with disabilities?
- Are there any experiences in your life that would make it difficult for you to receive an abuse disclosure from a child or student in our ministry? We want to be supportive of any child who has the courage to speak with a volunteer leader in our church and we want to be sensitive to the leaders for whom it may be emotionally disruptive to receive this disclosure.
- What characteristics do you possess that make you a good fit for working with children/youth?

³ Please consult an employment attorney in your area to review the language of your application and interview questions, as employment laws and regulations vary from state to state. Your church should ensure that your practices do not violate the laws of your jurisdiction.

A number of sample forms ask the applicant if they have been abused in the past. Though often asked with the desire to protect children and volunteers, it is unwise to ask this question. Abuse prevention expert and author Victor Vieth gives four reasons including this question on an application can be problematic.

1. Asking this question buys into a myth that if you were abused as a child, you are likely to offend yourself. This myth has resulted in many survivors, particularly men, not sharing their experiences.
2. The question may force some survivors to be untruthful simply because they are not emotionally prepared to share their experiences with another person.
3. Sex offenders will likely use this question to their advantage. An offender may lie about his or her history of abuse or may speak of abuse in a way to convince the church he or she is the last person who would commit such a crime. There is research on convicted sex offenders showing many of them speak of their childhood to manipulate others into being sympathetic to them. It seems logical, then, to assume they would also do this in an application for employment in order to gain access to children.
4. If your desire is to care for survivors, there are more sensitive approaches that can be taken. Other questions you can ask may reveal trauma, such as questions about alcohol abuse, drug usage, or anger. In the context of discussing these factors, a survivor may choose to share a history of abuse. Also, churches often receive outcries and other information from survivors not by asking them directly but by demonstrating sensitivity to this history. Preach about abuse, host a Bible study, have resources in the library, and let employees know if they have any struggles stemming from their childhood, the church will do all it can to help.⁴

Whether or not you include a question about being abused in the past, you may receive a disclosure from a survivor as you ask questions on applications or in interviews. It is important to be prepared to work with the survivor in a pastoral and caring way.

Any information about past abuse should be kept as confidential as possible. If they do wish to speak to someone about their experience, it is important to know in advance who will have that conversation so it can happen in a timely manner.⁵ Part of caring for a survivor of sexual abuse means allowing him or her to be the one that makes decisions about when and to whom their experiences are told. However, churches must ensure that they fulfill all legal requirements to report or inform key people for the safety of the survivor or others' safety.⁶

It is also helpful to include a spot for the applicant to confirm that all the information given is true and that the applicant may be declined employment or fired if found to be untrue.⁷ You may also need to

⁴ Victor Vieth, email correspondence, August 6, 2020.

⁵ To learn more about how to respond well in the initial stages of learning about sexual abuse, see the [Becoming a Church that Cares Well for the Abused](#) curriculum. Lesson 4 on Key Professionals in Victim Advocate Roles, Lesson 5 on Key Responses to Sexual Abuse, and Lesson 9 on Pastoral Care after Reporting will be particularly helpful as you prepare for these discussions.

⁶ To learn more about reporting, see the following chapters of [Becoming a Church that Cares Well for the Abused](#) curriculum: Lesson 2: Matthew 18 Complements (Doesn't Compete with) Romans 13, Lesson 7: What Happens When You Call CPS? Don't Avoid What You Don't Understand, and Appendix A that lists state by state reporting guidelines.

⁷ Church Mutual Insurance Company, "Safety Tips on a Sensitive Subject: Child Sexual Abuse," Church Mutual, 2010. <http://www.agfinancial.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/INS-SafetyTipsSenSubject.pdf>

obtain on the application written permission from an applicant to check all previous employment and volunteer positions related to the applicant's work with children, including references not listed by the applicant.⁸

Gaps in employment or frequent moves to different cities or regions are areas where further questions are warranted. As you review the application, take note of any gaps in employment or frequent moves to ask the applicant about in the interview or to ask past employers during reference checks.

Further Resources:

[Sample Children and Youth Ministry Volunteer Application](#) by Brotherhood Mutual

[Worker Renewal Application: Volunteers and Employees](#) by Brotherhood Mutual

[Example FBC Volunteer Application](#) by Darkness to Light

[Example Short Term Volunteer Application](#) by Darkness to Light

Background checks

Background checks are a necessary step, but are never a guarantee that a person is safe. Very few cases of sexual abuse are ever reported or prosecuted, so a background check is not likely to uncover potential bad actors unless they are in the small minority of perpetrators who have been caught, tried, convicted, and have not plead down to a lesser sentence. While it is necessary to complete a background check on all staff and volunteers, it should never be your only screening mechanism.

Veteran law enforcement agent and background check expert Mike McCarty highlights the dangers that churches who rely solely on simple background checks face: "Churches and ministries are flooded with cheap background check solutions from a highly unregulated background screening industry. There is no such thing as a single, complete database of criminal records, not even the FBI. Sexual predators are highly motivated, and the current church and ministry approach to background screening is no match. Protecting children and the ministry requires a complex approach that includes training, comprehensive background checks, reference checks and the development and implementation of security teams."⁹

When choosing a background check provider, it is important to choose an option that includes the following:

- a social security number verification to validate identity, other names, and develop address history¹⁰
- a multi-state or national criminal database search and county criminal search¹¹
- the scope of the search should be as far back as the records allow
- real-time arrest alerts, which notify you anytime that the person is arrested in the future

⁸ Tchividjian and Berkovits in *The Child Safeguarding Policy Guide* recommend collateral references, saying, "Collateral references -- people the applicant did not directly supply -- are, in general, more valuable sources of information. The church should seek out and speak with these references as well. References whom the applicant would not expect the church to call may be more willing to speak freely about the applicant and give honest feedback." Basyle Tchividjian and Shira M. Betkovits, *The Child Safeguarding Policy Guide* (Greensboro: New Growth Press, 2017), 72.

⁹ Safe Hiring Solutions- Background Screening, "Leadership Team," accessed May 29, 2019, <https://www.safehiringsolutions.com/leadership-team>.

¹⁰ Safe Hiring Solutions, "10 Things to Know Before Selecting a Background Screening Firm," accessed May 29, 2019, <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/59f5c9bf0abd0485b36a0340/t/5a0dceccc83025ee41493006/1510854348832/10+things+to+know+before+you+hire+a+background+screening+firm.pdf>

¹¹ Safe Hiring Solutions, "10 Things to Know Before Selecting a Background Screening Firm," accessed May 29, 2019, <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/59f5c9bf0abd0485b36a0340/t/5a0dceccc83025ee41493006/1510854348832/10+things+to+know+before+you+hire+a+background+screening+firm.pdf>.

Conducting a comprehensive background check on each staff member and volunteer may require a small increase in your budget for this area, but it will be well worth the investment. Johnson Ferry Baptist Church, a Southern Baptist congregation, is one church that has decided to make this investment. Their director of Human Resources, Jill Kearney, explains their decision: “Johnson Ferry takes seriously protecting our minors, elderly, employees, volunteers and the church as a whole. In an effort to do ministry with excellence, which is a core value of our church, we decided to dig deeper in our background check process, inevitably increasing costs. If this helps us to protect our minors and the elderly from abuse of any kind, we view this as being a good steward of what the Lord has blessed us with.”

The church should make a decision and create a policy before considering any particular applicant on what results are acceptable and unacceptable and adhere to the same set of policies for everyone. This avoids favoritism and improves the screening process. If something is disclosed through the background check that causes you to be unsure how to proceed, seek legal counsel.

Although enforcement of such policies is costly in time and money, no value can be placed upon the life of a child. The church must be a safe place where individuals can be trusted.

FAYE SCOTT, 24-YEAR VETERAN CHILDREN’S MINISTER

Remember that while background checks are essential, a clean background check is not a stamp of approval. It only shows convictions for those over the age of 18, so some offenders that you would not want working with children or students in your church may pass a background check due to plea deals, a lack of evidence, or a juvenile conviction. Also, if your background checks do not include real time arrest alerts, you will want to periodically refresh background checks for all of your staff and volunteers.¹²

Further Resources:

[Background Screening Checklist](#) by Brotherhood Mutual

[“Preventing Holes in your Criminal Background Check”](#) by Brotherhood Mutual

[10 Things to Know before Selecting a Background Screening Firm](#) by Safe Hiring Solutions

[5 Keys of a Quality Employment Background Check](#) by Safe Hiring Solutions

Reference checks

Reference checks are one of the most important tools when screening for hiring employees and selecting volunteers. However, it is not enough to just ask for references—churches must follow through and actually talk to the references. The CDC recommends verbal, not just written references.¹³ Reference checks should always occur prior to hiring, not as a formality after making an offer. View the list of employers, volunteer supervisors, and personal references as data points that should be pursued in order to verify the person is who they say they are and does not have any red flags from previous employment or ministry work. Employment references should be verified for accuracy and job performance. Other

¹² Many churches opt to do this every two to three years.

churches or ministries where the applicant has served should be contacted regarding those positions and the individual's interaction with children and students. It can also be helpful to obtain a reference from a past church, a family member, or at least one person of the opposite sex. Some questions that may be informative interviewing references are as follows:

- Please verify the position, responsibilities, and start and end date of the applicant.
- What was your relationship with the applicant, and how long did you know him/her?
- Please describe the applicant's interaction with children/students.
- Please describe the applicant's interaction with supervisors and those in authority.
- What strengths does the applicant possess in working with children/students?
- What weaknesses or challenges did the applicant have in working with children/students?
- Have you ever seen the applicant push boundaries or break policies?
- Do you have any hesitancy in recommending this applicant to work with children/students?
- Would your organization have this person back in the future?

It is crucial to be persistent in following up with references, because some references may be reluctant to share negative information with prospective employers. Follow up with the reference by phone. Be sure to keep a record of the recommendation in a permanent file.¹⁴

Be sure when checking references, to note and follow up on discrepancies between information given by an applicant and by references.

Job applicants may sometimes be uncomfortable with their current employer being contacted as they may not want their current employer to know they are looking for another position. If that is the case, you may postpone contacting their current employer, but as the process continues and you seek to hire the applicant, the employer should be contacted for a reference before hiring the individual.¹⁵

Some employers and organizations may be reluctant to share information about past employees or volunteers out of a fear of liability for defamation. One option for relieving these concerns and ensuring that you receive full, candid information from references about applicants is to ask the applicant to sign a reference release form. This form protects references, past employers, and organizations with which the employer has been involved.

Below is a template release that can be used as a part of your application materials. You should consult with an attorney in your state before using this form, but this form has been reviewed by lawyers from a number of states.¹⁶

¹³ Center for Disease Control and Prevention, "Preventing Child Sexual Abuse Within Youth-serving Organization: Getting Started on Policies and Procedures" *US Department of Health and Human Services*, 2007, p. 7, <https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/pdf/preventingchildsexualabuse-a.pdf>.

¹⁴ Church Mutual Insurance Company, "Safety Tips on a Sensitive Subject: Child Sexual Abuse," *Church Mutual*, 2010. <http://www.agfinancial.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/INS-SafetyTipsSenSubject.pdf>.

¹⁵ Church Mutual Insurance Company, "Safety Tips on a Sensitive Subject: Child Sexual Abuse," *Church Mutual*, 2010. <http://www.agfinancial.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/INS-SafetyTipsSenSubject.pdf>.

¹⁶ This form was reviewed by lawyers in the District of Columbia, Florida, Illinois, Maryland, Tennessee, and Texas.

Sample Authorization and Release Form

I authorize and request the companies, ministries, and organizations identified on Exhibit A (the Organizations), including any members of the Organizations, to share with [Your Church or Ministry's Name] (the Church) information and opinions of any kind relating to my employment, volunteer work, or other service with the Organizations.

I release the Organizations and their members from any restrictions which might otherwise make the information or opinions confidential or privileged.

I also release the Organizations, their members, and the Church from any liability and any claim for damages I might have because of this request for information and opinions, or because of the information and opinions which are shared because of this request.

I understand that the Church is considering me for a position of ministry. I am giving permission to the Organizations and their members to share information and opinions of a religious and ecclesiastical nature arising out of my previous ministry.

I have read this Authorization and Release Form and had the option and opportunity to consult with my attorney about it. I am signing this Authorization and Release Form willingly and with full understanding that I am waiving some of my legal rights.

Signature of Applicant

Name of Applicant

Exhibit A: List of Reference Organizations

Organization Name	Supervisor/Contact	Address	Email	Phone Number

Further Resources:

[Example of a reference request form](#) used by a Southern Baptist church.

[Reference Response Information](#), by Brotherhood Mutual

[IMB Statement on Child Abuse and Sexual Harassment](#), International Mission Board

Internet Check

In an era in which most people have an online presence, it is helpful to review an applicant's online information for red flags or any content that could indicate improper behavior. A general Google search may yield helpful information. Are there any news articles written that include their name?

By searching the applicant online, you may be able to ascertain what the applicant values, their level of discernment, and how they interact with children. Red flags that are often found on social media are inappropriate pictures, suggestive or even explicit comments, and excessive commenting and interest in children or students by someone older. You may find some of these red flags, or you may come across other information that indicates this person is not a good fit for ministry service.

- Do the applicant's posts contain language/content that would be deemed inappropriate for a volunteer/staff serving with minors in a church setting?
- Who are the applicant's friends? Does that raise a red flag? For example, if the applicant is in his 30's or 40's and a large portion of his friends are young teenage boys, this might be a red flag.
- What sites is the applicant affiliated with? Are the movies, music, and other items of interest on their social media telling in some way?

All of these items provide a profile of the applicant's personal life that help to determine if the applicant is the type of person the church would consider to be a positive influence for minors.

Interviews

An organization cannot know or test for a person's probability of offending. Instead, leaders must rely on intuition and observations. If you are uncomfortable or something does not feel right about an applicant, you are better off postponing entry into employment or volunteer positions with children or students until the church has more experience and interaction with that person.

SAMANTHA KILPATRICK, ATTORNEY AND FORMER PROSECUTOR

An interview is a time to be face-to-face with the applicant or potential volunteer. Direct questions about prior jobs and interaction with children and students are helpful. It is also a time for you to educate the applicant about your church or ministry area and your vision and priority for child protection. In educating about your church, review your child protection policies during the interview and ask if the person has any questions or concerns with following the policies. The applicant's reaction may be a helpful indicator of the level of buy-in to child protection. Efforts by the applicant to push back on the

boundaries of the established policies or to seek exceptions are a red flag. As author and advocate Victor Vieth has shared, “Candidates who don’t believe such policies are necessary or express any hesitancy in abiding by the policies may not be child abusers, but they are also less likely to be vigilant in keeping children safe.”¹⁷

By communicating you have policies that you enforce and evaluate, you also make yourself less inviting for predators and send a clear message about the value you place on children and your priority of keeping them safe from harm. At the same time, you are learning more about the applicant and whether he or she is a good fit from the perspective of beliefs, background, safety, experience, demeanor, and responsibility.

Before the interview, have a prepared list of questions and review the applicant’s written application. Ask open-ended questions. In addition to following up on questions listed on the written application, **here are some other example questions that could be included on your list:**

Sample interview Questions

Please consult an employment attorney in your area to review the language of your application and interview questions, as employment laws and regulations vary from state to state. Your church should ensure that your practices do not violate the laws of your jurisdiction.

- **What makes you desire to serve with our organization?**¹⁸
Be aware of answers that focus on the applicant and what they gain from the situation rather than on serving the children. Answers such as, “Working with children makes me feel fulfilled”, may be a red flag. Follow up to see if they have children’s interest at heart or if they are seeking to have their own interests fulfilled by working with children.
- **Is there an age group of children you prefer to work with? If so, why?**
Are they willing to work with any age group or sex? Do they have a preoccupation with a specific type of child? If they have a specific group in mind, follow up and ask, would you be willing to work with a different age-group?
- **What sort of supervisors do you work well with and what sort of supervisors are difficult for you?**
Do they express a desire for independence and a distaste for oversight?
- **Have you reviewed our child protection policies? What did you think of them?**
Applicants who don’t believe the policies are necessary or who communicate a hesitancy to abide by the policy “may not be child abusers but they are also less likely to be vigilant in keeping children safe.”¹⁹
- **Is there anything in your past we should know about as we consider you for this position?**
Though someone with accusations or criminal behavior in the past may not share, it is helpful to ask and communicates to a past offender that you will be vigilant in protecting the children in your care.
- **Would anyone be concerned about you working with children or students? Why or why not?**
Like the question above, this gives them an opportunity to share concerning information with you, but also communicates you will be vigilant about protecting the children in your care.

¹⁷ Victor Vieth, “Suffer the Little Children: Developing Effective Church Policies on Child Maltreatment,” *Godly Response to Abuse in the Christian Environment*, 2013, https://www.enoughabuse.org/images/stories/gk_resourcebank/Suffer%20the%20Children%20by%20Victor%20Vieth.pdf.

¹⁸ Center for Disease Control and Prevention, “Preventing Child Sexual Abuse Within Youth-serving Organization: Getting Started on Policies and Procedures” US Department of Health and Human Services, 2007, p. 8, <https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/pdf/preventingchildsexualabuse-a.pdf>.

¹⁹ Vieth. Ibid.

- **What would you do if a student expressed to you a hesitancy to be around another employee or volunteer or a dislike for that individual?**

You could use a number of scenarios in place of this one. What you are looking for in offering a scenario like the one above is the applicants response to potential concerns and awareness of grooming. Children often will make a partial disclosure or make a small comment to see if an adult is safe to disclose the abuse to. A question like this allows you to see how an applicant would respond and to train applicants to recognize grooming or partial disclosures if they do serve with your organization.

- **Tell me what you would do in this scenario. We have a policy of avoiding isolation with a child. One day, you walk through the hall and find a child alone with a teacher in a classroom behind a closed door. When you come in, the teacher says that the child was misbehaving and needed to be corrected in private. Nothing appears to be going on that is inappropriate. The teacher says they are ready to rejoin the others. What do you do?**

This scenario allows you to observe if the applicant will follow the policies and procedures you have in place. If there is a disregard for observing policies and procedures, that will put children and students in your care at risk.

- **You notice bruises up and down the legs of one of your students. When you ask what happened the child gets teary eyed and says his dad whipped him. Under our policies, would you report this to the authorities?**

If the candidate says he wouldn't report it right away but would investigate the matter, speak to the father, or otherwise fail to follow your mandated reporting policies, he or she is not a good candidate.

- **What do you like to do with your free time?**

This question allows you to get to know the applicant. Do they have adult friendships? Do they have other interests besides working with youth.

During the interview, it is helpful to have at least two trained personnel interview the applicant. This allows for multiple things to better happen at once: asking questions, observing non-verbals, listening to answers, recording responses, and having more than one person's assessment. Watch for inconsistencies or evasive responses in the interview that could indicate defensive behavior or deception.²⁰

As either part of the written application or a written portion of the interview, review key parts of your policy, and have the applicant affirm and initial the applicant's commitment to and awareness of policy. Some examples of statements for the applicant to review, initial, and ascribe to are:²¹

_____ I have received and read a copy of [church's] child protection policy;

_____ I will protect children/students and will never engage in any behavior that is dangerous or will harm them physically, emotionally, or spiritually.

_____ I will immediately report any inappropriate behavior that I observe or hear about regarding children/students and violations of the child protection policy.

_____ I will immediately report any known or suspected abuse that I observe or hear about to church leadership and government authorities.

_____ I will abide by all terms of the child protection policy, and if I have any questions, I will ask for clarity.

²⁰ Brotherhood Mutual, "Child Protection in a Ministry Environment: Guidelines for Ministry Workers," *Brotherhood Mutual Insurance Company*, 2019 <https://www.brotherhoodmutual.com/index.cfm/resources/safety-library/publications/guidelines-for-ministry-workers/guidelines-for-ministry-workers/>

²¹ Some of these examples are similar and have been adapted from *The Child Safeguarding Policy Guard for Churches and Ministries* by Basyle Tchividjian. Basyle Tchividjian and Shira M. Berkovits, *The Child Safeguarding Policy Guide* (Greensboro: New Growth Press, 2017), 65.

Grooming practices

It is difficult to believe someone you know would abuse a child or that it would happen at your church, but that mindset can be problematic. Churches and youth-serving organizations attract offenders. 90% of child sexual abuse victims know their abuser.²² One study also found that 93% of abusers self-identified as religious.²³ Churches, specifically, are easy targets because there tends to be a high level of trust, as well as a great need for volunteers to ensure that child- and student-serving programs operate and run smoothly.

Offenders can use relationships, positions of authority, and the trust of parents and organizations to groom children and those who care for them and to find opportunities to be isolated with their victims. This creates an environment where they can do harm and keep their victims compliant without using actual, physical force. Here are several grooming practices to watch for:

- Gifts or special attention given to a specific child
- Attempts to get a child alone
- Increased physical touch of a child
- Helping a child break rules
- Keeping secrets with a child
- Shaming or blaming a child
- Inappropriate communication with a child in person, by phone, or online

These are helpful to be aware of as you seek to hire staff or volunteers that will be working with children or students. It is also helpful to consider as you implement policies and practices in your church so as to make the process more difficult to access children. Some churches have everyone going through the membership process volunteer with the kids as a part of their membership process. We recommend you raise the bar by implementing preventative policies and procedures and by having a process for hiring staff and volunteers. Working with children is not a right. There may be potential volunteers who walk away and don't go through the process because of the added hassle, but it is important in the process to not make access to children easier, but to do what you can to ensure their safety.

Orientation and training

The final step in the hiring and recruitment process is orientation and training of your new volunteers and employees regarding your ministry area and child protection policy. While this occurs after a decision to hire or an invitation for volunteer to serve, solid training on policy and abuse dynamics must happen early and also on a regular basis throughout one's employment or service to the ministry. Many liability carriers require training on a one- to three-year basis, but consistent training even in shorter modules will reinforce the church's priority of abuse prevention and child safety.

It is imperative that all of your staff members and volunteers be required to attend training on how to prevent and identify sexual abuse. This not only acts as a barrier for predators who look for soft

²² Darkness to Light, "Offender Statistics" *Darkness to Light*, 2017, https://www.d2l.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/Statistics_2_Perpetrators.pdf.

²³ Brotherhood Mutual, "Child Protection in a Ministry Environment: Guidelines for Ministry Workers," *Brotherhood Mutual Insurance Company*, 2019 <https://www.brotherhoodmutual.com/index.cfm/resources/safety-library/publications/guidelines-for-ministry-workers/guidelines-for-ministry-workers/>.

targets or easy access to children, but it also allows for more people in the community who are watching out for any signs of grooming or child sexual abuse and who know the policies and procedures set in place by your church. Training allows staff and volunteers to hold others accountable to the policies and to speak up and act quickly if someone is in violation of a policy. Further, when senior leaders participate in the training, it provides a signal to the entire team that the topic is important and a priority for the ministry.

The whole church is responsible for protecting its own. All of us who attend church are responsible. In our various traditions, all of us who participate in the weekly ritual of gathering to worship God must protect the people who gather in our midst.

All of us can watch for grooming behaviors and can identify patterns of predators. All of us can learn more about how to report abuse and hold predators legally accountable. All of us can protect our children and teenagers. And all of us can care for those who have been abused, at whatever life stage their trauma occurred. . . . I believe the next hashtag for the church is #allofus, because it will take all of us to care for and protect the church.²⁴

**SUSAN CODONE, A SURVIVOR OF CLERGY
SEXUAL ABUSE IN A SOUTHERN BAPTIST CHURCH**

There are many excellent ministries and local agencies that are willing to come in to train your congregation. Although in-person training is recommended, as it allows participants to personally engage and ask questions during the training, there are many excellent online training resources as well.

Sample In-Person Training Programs

All of these programs have a fee for participation in the training.

- Darkness to Light's [Stewards of Children](#) Training
- [GRACE Safeguarding Initiative](#)
- [MinistrySafe](#)

²⁴ Susan Codone, "A message for all of us who attend church" *AL.com*, July 14, 2019, <https://www.al.com/opinion/2019/07/a-message-for-all-of-us-who-attend-church.html>.

- [Safe Hiring Solutions](#)
- [Zero Abuse Project's Keeping Faith](#): Empowering Faith Communities to Recognize and Respond to Child Abuse & Neglect Sample Online Training Resources

Sample Online Training Resources

Although we recommend in-person training for every church, these resources are helpful for supplemental training or for staff and volunteers who are unable to attend an in-person training.

- [Becoming a Church that Cares Well for the Abused](#): This training curriculum of a handbook, an introductory video, and 12 lesson videos brings together top experts from various fields to help leaders understand and implement the best practices for handling the variety of abuse scenarios at church, a school, or a ministry.
- [Darkness to Light Online Training Modules](#): D2L has six different online child abuse training modules. There is a fee but you can access them at any time.
- [Darkness to Light's Two Minutes for Prevention](#): 25 videos that are two minutes each.
- [Darkness to Light documentaries](#): These two documentaries provide a deeper understanding of the experience of child sexual abuse survivors in a way that is educational. They provide insight on child sexual abuse through the voices of the survivors.
- [ERLC 2019 Caring Well Conference Videos](#): The ERLC hosted a Caring Well Conference to provide teams with the opportunity to listen to survivors, learn from experts, and be equipped with an understanding of the full spectrum of abuse issues.
- [Freedom for the Captives 4-hour training](#): This free training can be used by any church (they simply have to fill out a form on the FFTC website). A viewer can take the videos at their leisure, and each video has an online test so that a church can be sure a volunteer staff member working with students has completed the video and understood the basic information.
- [GRACE's Valued Conference Videos](#): On the GRACE website, there are several videos from the Valued Conference addressing child abuse in faith communities and anyone can link to them and use them in training.
- [MinistrySafe online Sexual Abuse Awareness training program](#)
- [Sacred Spaces' Ten Things Every Faith Community Should Know](#): On the website of Sacred Spaces, which works to address abuse within Jewish communities, there is a helpful video of Victor Vieth teaching at a synagogue providing basic child abuse information.
- [Sacred Spaces' Four Things Parents Should Know About Protecting Children](#): Also on the Sacred Spaces website, there is a workshop by Dr. Shira Berkovits directed at parents and giving them some basic information about keeping their children safe.
- [Safe Hiring Solutions Training on Church Safety](#)
- [Safe Ministry Online Training Program](#)

Lastly, as a part of the orientation process, your church might consider a trial period and a follow-up for employees and volunteers where there is increased supervision and evaluation at a six-month or one-year review in order to assess performance and fit within the ministry. Where it is feasible this trial period should include a time of observation where the staff member or volunteer has an opportunity to observe others in the role. After they have had the opportunity to observe, there should also be a period where they are overseen and leadership has an opportunity to observe them in the role.

Further Resources:

[Developing a Code of Conduct](#) by Darkness to Light

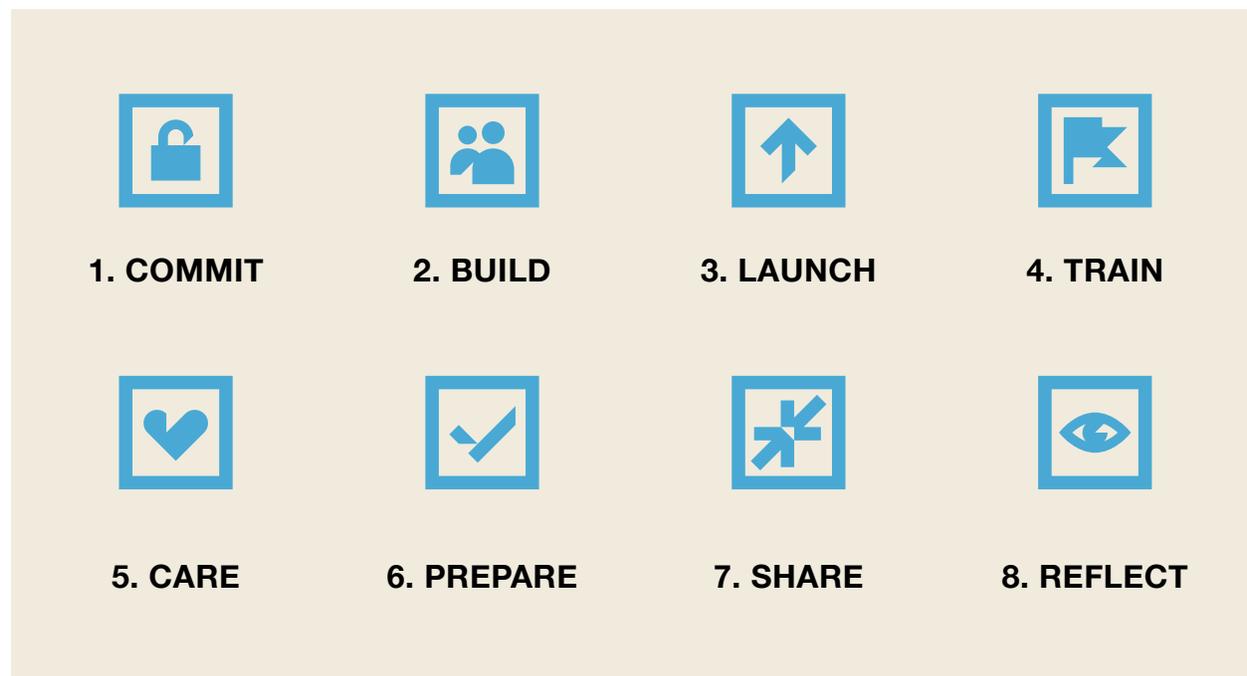
[Sample Code of Conduct](#) by Darkness to Light

[Example FBC Volunteer Policy](#) by Darkness to Light

Conclusion

Being thorough in your hiring of staff and volunteers for your children and youth ministries, requires effort, but it takes seriously the duty of the shepherd to protect the flock. It also heeds Jesus' words in Matthew 18:6, "but whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to have a great millstone fastened around his neck and to be drowned in the depth of the sea." Screening staff and volunteers, especially those who work with children and students, should go beyond a simple background check and should also include an application process, a reference check, an interview, an internet and social media search, and orientation and training.

TAKE THE CARING WELL CHALLENGE



			
1. COMMIT	2. BUILD	3. LAUNCH	4. TRAIN
			
5. CARE	6. PREPARE	7. SHARE	8. REFLECT



Visit caringwell.com to learn more and sign up.



If you would like to learn more about prevention and care at your church, head over to caringwell.com to take the **Caring Well Challenge**.

The **Caring Well Challenge** is a unified call to action for churches cooperating with the Southern Baptist Convention and provides churches with an adaptable and attainable pathway to immediately enhance their efforts to prevent abuse and care for abuse survivors. Churches that commit to the challenge will find resources to help equip their church to navigate these issues.