

Safe Church Project Scope

Over a seven month period, Samaritan Safe Church will provide 18 hours of training to “Safe Church” teams from several different churches; 2 hours of adult education at each church; 4 hours of training for church staff and volunteers; and a half day adult survivors’ retreat. In addition, each church will receive a Christian Education curriculum for grades K-12 to teach children and youth how to develop and maintain healthy boundaries and protect themselves from abuse of any kind. This project will begin in January 2018 and conclude in July 2018.

Each participating church forms a team of at least 3-4 people committed to five Saturday morning meetings spread over seven months. The teams come together in an ecumenical “cluster” to develop their child protection policy or enhance an existing policy, and learn about child sexual abuse so they can resource their congregation. Each 3.5 hour meeting is a mix of education, training, resource material, and facilitated discussion. Individual teams from participating churches work between cluster meetings to complete segments of policy. They also communicate their progress and provide information to their congregations throughout the process.

Additionally, a 6th meeting provides 4 hours of training for staff and volunteers on recognizing and responding to child sexual abuse, and a half day retreat for adult survivors of childhood sexual abuse is scheduled to develop prayers, liturgy, and other worship resources.

How should we select members of our Team? The best team composition includes people who are well-respected and influential in your congregation, as they will become the ‘advocates’ for implementation of the policy and education within your congregation. A team might include someone skilled at the detail of policy writing (we will provide several policy examples but each church will need to modify according to their needs); someone on the Christian Education and/or Youth team; people in your congregation who are “mandated reporters” of suspected child abuse in their professions (teachers, social workers, counselors, etc.); police officers; adult survivors who have healed and want to protect other children from abuse; and parents of young children or teens. We strongly encourage, but do not require, a pastor to participate on the team.

What are we being asked to do as participants? The risk of child sexual abuse is reduced in a “Safe Church” in several ways. First, children are empowered to recognize inappropriate actions through Christian Education curriculums; it also provides them with several trusted adults in the church setting they can talk to about confusing or upsetting touch by someone at home, community, or church. Second, when a congregation is educated about this issue and the church has a clear policy about how it will respond, offenders are less likely to consider it a place in which to select child victims. Third, the issue of child sexual abuse is approached through a theological framework according to the congregation’s tradition and practices, embedding the issue within the broader mission of the congregation.

The policy that is created is specific to the congregation, and includes appointment of a standing Child Protection Committee charged with making sure the policy is followed and training, screening, and education is ongoing. Finally, adult survivors in the church are encouraged to become resources

by helping to create liturgies and prayers reflecting their experiences for use by the congregation during worship. Honoring their experiences in this way facilitates healing, and creates opportunities to further incorporate their voices into the language of faith.

How will this benefit my church? 1. Learn about the key issues related to child sexual abuse, and other forms of child abuse as defined by state law. This includes learning about indicators of various types of abuse; appropriate responses when abuse is suspected or disclosed; how children are engaged by sexual offenders and convinced not to tell; what are typical reactions of perpetrators when abuse is alleged; what are the long-term impacts; and how child sexual abuse impacts adult survivors.

2. Evaluate the current policies and practices of the church related to the care and supervision of children and youth. This is an evaluation of places and settings in which child abuse could occur as well as circumstances and situations that could make it easier for an abuser to hurt a child. Current policies are identified and evaluated for appropriateness. Current policies for screening and training staff and volunteers are also reviewed.

3. Develop a child protection policy and procedures for the care and supervision of children and youth. The policy begins with a clear statement of purpose with a theological foundation (covenant). The policy will contain basic guidelines for safe ministry with children and youth. It will include screening procedures for staff and volunteers working with children and would require initial standardized training and periodic refreshers for all who work with children, guided by a standing Child Protection Committee. The policy will also address how staff, pastors, and volunteers will respond to suspected, alleged or disclosed child abuse. We will offer several policy examples from other churches we have worked with; each church can choose the one that best fits their need to use as a starting point.

4. Educate the congregation about child sexual abuse, and communicate with the congregation about the child protection initiative. Education is a priority so that it is not only about protection of children within the church, but also about making the church a safe place where children can disclose abuse that has occurred in other settings.

5. Implement the child & youth protection curriculum.

6. Encourage survivors in the congregation to attend the Retreat, and use the worship resources developed by these survivors.

7. Present new policies and procedures to the church council or other approving body (after any other required reviews are completed). The approved policy would be made widely available to members of the congregation and a second round of educational events would be scheduled in conjunction with implementation of the policy.

8. Obtain any necessary screening documentation for all who currently work with children and youth; training for staff and volunteers on recognition and response; and have teachers trained to use Sunday school curriculums on preventing child sexual abuse.