

## ASSESSING YOUR CHURCH PROTOCOL

- \_\_\_ 1) Have you created a Safety Response Team (SRT)?
- \_\_\_ 2) Is there a clear method of determining who is on the SRT and how membership will change? Does it stipulate how often the team will meet?
- \_\_\_ 3) If there is no SRT, does the protocol indicate to whom reports of child maltreatment should be made?
- \_\_\_ 4) Does the protocol indicate that there will be training for SRT members? Staff working with children? The congregation? How often?
- \_\_\_ 5) Will this training include how to recognize symptoms of all types of child maltreatment?
- \_\_\_ 6) Does the protocol indicate how information about specific reporting procedures will be disseminated, including how often and to whom?
- \_\_\_ 7) Does the protocol reference the fact that clergy are mandated reporters and what that means?
- \_\_\_ 8) Does the protocol spell out how a report is made to DSS when this is necessary? What is the role of the SRT in making the report? Who actually contacts DSS? Who completes the written report within 48 hours?
- \_\_\_ 9) If the SRT is responsible for making the report, what happens if members of the Team are not available?
- \_\_\_ 10) If a SRT decides not to file a report, does the protocol indicate the procedure to be taken if the person who initiates the report does not agree, and still feels a report should be filed with DSS?
- \_\_\_ 11) Does the protocol indicate that all reports are to be kept confidential? Does it specify where these documents are to be kept and who has access to them?
- \_\_\_ 12) Does the protocol indicate who is responsible for monitoring and follow-up once the report has been made?
- \_\_\_ 13) Does the protocol mention how the child is to be treated during/following the report? (eg. Child should not be interviewed for the purpose of investigation, child should not be singled out or treated differently, etc.).
- \_\_\_ 14) Does the protocol spell out how the child's parents shall be notified?

- \_\_\_ 15) After the initial dissemination of the information on reporting, does the protocol indicate how often the dissemination of information will be repeated?
- \_\_\_ 16) Does the protocol indicate what procedures one must follow in order to work with children in the church?
- \_\_\_ 17) Does the protocol address such issues as:
- the number of adults in the classroom
  - the age of teachers
  - that known sexual offenders cannot have access to children
  - the configuration or visibility of classrooms
- \_\_\_ 18) Does the protocol indicate the constraints placed on known offenders who chose to come to church? How will this person interact with the SRT?
- \_\_\_ 19) Does the protocol indicate what is expected of the accused when someone within the church is accused of sexual abuse? What contact will this person have with the SRT?
- \_\_\_ 20) Does the protocol indicate that, if a case is reported, the church members and staff will cooperate fully with civil authorities?

From: Cynthia Crosson-Tower, *Listen to the Lambs: A Clergy Guide to Child Maltreatment* (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, in process).

## DEVELOPING A CHURCH REPORTING PROTOCOL

An effective church reporting protocol needs to have specific components. The following should help you to include what is necessary in each category.

### A. Structure for Responding to Reports

#### 1) Is there a denomination-wide procedure that must govern your individual church's protocol?

Some denominations have a set of procedures that churches must follow. Check these out before you begin. The following is based on the assumption that your church has some degree of freedom to design a protocol.

#### 2) Will your church create a Safety Response Team (SRT)?

Safety Response Teams are usually composed of 4-6 members who function to screen child maltreatment reports, give technical advice and in most cases, take the responsibility for making the reports. Usually on such teams are the pastor or assistant pastor, the director of religious education, a member of the governing body, and several other members.

#### 2) How will the SRT members be chosen? How often will the membership turnover?

SRT members may be elected or appointed by the minister or the governing body. They may have a specific term and be then replaced, or a Team member may be on the SRT until he or she chooses not to be. Some turnover is probably advisable.

#### 3) How often will the SRT meet?

Some SRTs meet only when there is a crisis, but it is a good idea to meet more frequently to arrange training for church members and staff and review policies periodically. A SRT that meets more often usually functions more smoothly in a crisis.

#### 4) If there is not to be a SRT, who will receive maltreatment reports? How then will he or she proceed?

Having a SRT is recommended rather than leaving the enormous responsibility in the hands of one person.

#### 5) When someone in the congregation wants to report a situation of child maltreatment, how does he or she contact the Team? What if it is not on a regular church day?

Numbers of those on the Team should be readily available. The pastor may be the contact person but what if he or she is away?

Who then should be contacted? Some pastors prefer that someone else be the chairperson of the Team.

## **B. Training for the SRT, staff and congregants**

### **1) What type of training will be offered? To whom?**

There should be training in the following areas:

- Signs and symptoms of child maltreatment
- How to respond when a child discloses
- How to make a report to the SRT or another designee
- The importance of confidentiality
- How a report is made to DSS
- What will occur once a report has been made

SRT members should have more in depth training than the general congregation

### **2) How often will training be given?**

Training needs to be done regularly as church membership will change. You might also develop a manual that can be given out and/or post reporting policies and procedures in the parish hall. Training can be available through your specific denomination or through DSS. Private individuals may also offer training for churches.

## **C. Procedures for Reporting**

### **1) How does a church member make a report?**

If there is a SRT, church members should know how to get in touch with Team members. If there is no SRT, they must know whom to contact. How might a Team member be contacted when not during church hours?

### **2) At what point should a situation be reported to DSS?**

As mandated reporters, clergy must report when they have suspicion that there is abuse or neglect. *It is not up to the church or the SRT to investigate.* But, it may be useful for the SRT to go over the material to determine what information is available.

### **3) Who makes the actual report to DSS?**

If there is a SRT, a member is usually designated to do the reporting. This takes the pressure off the initiator of the concern. If there is no SRT, someone must be designated to make the report. There will be a verbal report and a written one that will be due 48 hours after the called in report. Forms for this written report are available from DSS and should be kept some where at the church that is accessible to the SRT. It is also important to address the situation of the following: A SRT discusses a case and does not

believe that it needs to be reported, but the initial reporter still does. What does he or she do?

**4) Where should the report be directed?**

DSS operates Monday through Friday. If the report must be made on a weekend, it is important to know the number of the after hours hotline.

**5) At what point are the child's parents notified and by whom?**

This should be determined based on the situation. If the abuse is at home, premature notification of parents can put the child in more danger. On the other hand, parents need to feel that they are considered as well. If you have concerns, ask DSS when they feel the parents should be contacted.

**6) Once the report has been made, how is the child treated?**

It is important to specify that a child should not be interviewed by anyone at the church once a report has been made. The child's/family's confidentiality should be respected, and while the child should be treated with concern, it is important that normalcy be protected as much as possible.

**7) Where is the written report to be kept? Who will have access to it? How will confidentiality be protected?**

Churches have active rumor mills. It is important that the child be protected by not having everyone know about the report. Only those concerned should have access to the information. The report should also be kept in a church office and should be available to only those who must see it for official reasons.

**8) What if a report is made to DSS and they do not screen it in?**

Although situations seem serious to us, DSS may not be able to investigate or open the case. If this happens and you are still concerned, report again. Keeping notes on what has occurred may help with the validation of a case.

**D. Church Policies for Prevention**

**1) What modifications need to be made to church facilities in order to protect children?**

For example, classroom with windows in the doors or classroom doors that have been removed.

**2) What type of screening will there be for staff that interact with children?**

Some churches insist of criminal record checks. Some require that some one has been a member of the church for at least six months before they are able to work with youth. It is important that those who minister to children are not "unknown quantities". Suggest type of screening might be:

Application

Personal interview with DRE or pastor

Description of church membership for last five years

Two references

Criminal records check

There should be a pool of substitutes who have been screened and can be called upon when necessary.

**3) Are there stipulations as to who can teach?**

Many churches now require that teachers be adults (over 21) and not the teens that were at one time recruited to teach. If a young person wants to become involved in teaching, it should be as a teaching assistant to an adult.

**4) Are there policies about teacher-student interaction?**

For the safety of both children and adults, it is wise to have at least two adults in a room where they are interacting with children. If this is not possible (as in small churches), it is advisable to keep doors open and to have another adult as a roving extra (going from room to room at odd intervals). One teacher or adult and students should not be isolated in another building. Parents should be encouraged to visit at will.

**5) What are church policies regarding the arrival and dismissal of children**

Children should be brought directly to their class by a parent, or if they go to church before going to Sunday School, they should gather there and be brought to the classroom by the teachers. Parents of nursery children should fill out a form indicating who is authorized to pick the child up after class and the child should be released only to those people. Older children should be brought to the coffee hour or common gathering place of adults in a group following their class.

**6) What church policies govern known offenders within the congregation?**

Congregations that are home to known sexual offenders of have offenders join, suggest that some of the following be adopted.

Known offenders cannot:

- Take positions where they will interact with children
- Serve on committee within the church
- Be unattended on church grounds at any time
- Have a key to church facilities
- Be alone with children at any time

The fact that he or she is a sexual offender should be known by designated officials specified in the protocol. Many churches ask the offender to sign a contract that he or she agrees to these conditions.

From: Cynthia Crosson-Tower, *A Clergy Guide to Child Maltreatment* (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, in press).