Background checks, essential for kids' ministry, often remain a mystery

by Bob Smietana
May 20, 2024

(Illustration via Pixabay/Creative Commons)

About 10 years ago, when the state of Pennsylvania passed a law requiring a background check for anyone who worked with children, Megan Benninger volunteered to help her church comply.

At the time, Benninger and her husband were members of a small Southern Baptist Church, where the nursery was run by volunteers and things were a bit disorganized.

"Everything was loosey-goosey," she said. "I don't know if we even had a schedule for the nursery."

Before they started organizing the background checks, Benninger said a church leader pulled her aside and told her not to include the church's pastors. None of them worked with kids. Besides, they were pastors and so above reproach.

"They said, don't even think about the pastors," she said. "So I didn't."

Years later Benninger learned that one of the pastors, a former Christian school principal, had been convicted of abusing a minor—a revelation [that tore](#) their little church apart.

Benninger left that church and now runs BaptistAccountability.org, a website that posts links to news stories about abusive pastors. She says churches can never be too careful.

"I never trust anyone anymore," said Benninger. "You just never know."

Since the Catholic sex abuse scandal of the early 2000s, many congregations have moved to make their churches safer for kids—passing new policies and procedures designed to screen out abusers and to report any abuse to authorities. But few denominations check to see if churches follow those procedures or track those who do.

A recent report on Southern Baptist churches [from](#) Lifeway Research [found](#) that about 58 percent of those congregations said they do background checks on staff who work with kids.

The Lifeway data was limited—only 29 of the Southern Baptist Convention's 41 state conventions collected data on abuse prevention in churches—and churches were not required to answer those questions. But even denominations with hierarchical structures—like the Episcopal Church or the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America—don't track what happens on the local level.

Instead, that is left to the local congregation or diocese. A spokesperson from the ELCA provided a link to [suggested policy](#) for congregations but said the denomination does not know what local churches are doing. A spokesperson from the Episcopal Church also provided a link to a general convention decision to produce safe church training materials but said, "decisions on implementation are local."

Emily Garcia, assistant rector at [Church of Our Redeemer](#) Episcopal Church in Lexington, Massachusetts, has worked with children's ministries for about 15 years, starting before she entered the ministry. She said that the local Episcopal diocese requires them to report details of its safe church programs on an annual basis.

Volunteers who work with children must pass a background check, Garcia says, and be an active part of the church for at least six months before starting the screening process.

"Someone came in on their first Sunday and said, 'I want to work with the children,'" she said, "and we said, 'OK, talk to us in six months.' Stick around for a while."

Garcia said potential volunteers also spend time observing with experienced volunteers—and then the more experienced volunteers give their feedback—just to make sure they feel OK with how the volunteer interacted with kids. Volunteers are also required to do a series of trainings.

She said the church has developed a culture that cares about the spiritual formation and safety of children. Having set policies and doing background checks helps maintain that culture, she added.

"The sense is that no one is above a background check," she said.

There are some signs that congregations nationwide are addressing abuse and prevention. The [2020 Faith Communities Today Survey](#) found that 96 percent of Catholic and Orthodox congregations do background checks, and 94 percent do training for those who work with children. Seventy-one percent of mainline congregations and 70 percent of evangelical churches in the study said they did background checks, while 65 percent of mainline congregations and 68 percent of evangelical churches did training for those who work with children.

Stephanie Nelson, pastor of the Covenant Church of Thomaston, Connecticut, a church in the Evangelical Covenant denomination, said all volunteers with kids are background-checked.

"On my second day on the job, I filled out a background check," she said.

But she said that is just a first step. She worries some churches may think a background check is enough to make a ministry safe.

It's not, she said.

"All they tell you is that someone has not been convicted," she said.

She said that volunteers at Thomaston Covenant have to be part of a church for a year before they work with kids. She also said that two adults are required in every church classroom and that the doors to classrooms are always kept open.

Nelson, who worked with children and youth at several churches before becoming a senior pastor, said the church stressed that safety is part of caring for the spiritual formation of kids.

"We are here to serve them," she said. "And our primary goal is to keep them safe."
—Religion News Service