How Dove’s Nest trains churches to keep children safe

“Churches are places of high trust—and high risk.”

Elizabeth Palmer interviews Anna Groff in the November 21, 2018 issue

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Anna Groff is the executive director of Dove’s Nest, an organization that equips faith communities to build safe environments for children and survivors. It trains teachers in the Circle of Grace *curriculum, a tool for helping young people maintain physical boundaries and recognize inappropriate situations.*

For those who don’t know the *Circle of Grace* curriculum, what’s the one point it makes that is most important to teach children?

Many children already receive sexuality and boundary education in school. *Circle of Grace* is distinct in communicating that people in the church care about all the parts of life, including our physical bodies and body safety. We want children to know that God cares and the church cares that they are safe and that their bodies are respected. *Circle of Grace* enables Christian educators to teach that no topic is off limits in church.

For example, a few days before *Circle of Grace* was being taught at a church in Grand Rapids, a first-grade student at a local Christian school texted a photo of his penis to another student. Since several of the church's children attended that school, the text message came up in conversation during a *Circle of Grace* lesson. The teacher alerted the director of children's ministries, who brought the parents into the discussion at dismissal time. "We can have those kind of conversations—about sexting, safety, our bodies—at church," the director told me. "It is fair game."

A small congregation might feel overwhelmed by the idea of developing and implementing a policy on the protection of children, especially when it involves screening volunteers. Further fears might arise from the recent court case in Illinois in which a pastor and congregation were sued for failing to implement their safety policy after a teenager was raped by her youth group leader. What would you advise?

Sometimes small churches think they're off the hook. They assume, "We're family here," not realizing that most abuse happens within families. And policy can be tricky. Once you have one, you ought to follow it: there are legal consequences if you don't. It needs to be implemented and updated regularly.

Dove's Nest offers consultation services for churches that are creating or updating their policy. Since churches have unique situations, getting a consultation can be more effective than getting the generic advice an insurance company might offer.

For example, we recommend that churches follow the two-adult rule to ensure that one adult is never alone with one child. We also recommend that churches work to avoid situations involving one adult with multiple children. At the same time, we offer workarounds to the two-adult rule, such as combining Sunday school classrooms if there's low attendance, moving class to a public space in the church, or utilizing roving hall monitors. All churches can work to decrease isolation and

secrecy, increase supervision and accountability, and make sure all activities are observable and interruptible.

How can organizations balance the rules of the policy with the often unexpected demands of everyday life—such as when a member of the church staff is asked to provide temporary care or transportation for a child?

Churches are places of high trust and therefore also places of high risk. We recommend that church staff remember their limitations and practice setting boundaries, especially when it comes to requests for childcare or transportation that would put them in a position of being alone with a child. Policies not only protect minors; they also protect adult volunteers and staff people.

What do you say to communities where calling the police is complicated by issues of race or immigration status?

In all our trainings, we emphasize the importance of reporting. If you suspect abuse or a child discloses abuse, believe the child and make a report immediately to child protective services or the police. You don’t have to have evidence or proof. And you don’t have to do the investigation yourself—or anything that resembles that. Cooperate with professionals who conduct the investigation.

However, we’re also working to understand how complicated this assertion is for some communities. Conservative Mennonite and Amish communities, with whom we often work, are often reluctant to involve the police. Some have formed their own crisis intervention teams. Last year we held a training session with a group of pastors in the Los Angeles area, many from immigrant churches. The discussion included the lack of trust in law enforcement, fears of backlash from families, and the desire to “solve it on our own”—concerns we now address in our training with all faith communities.

Churches with undocumented individuals may resist doing background checks for adult volunteers working with minors. There are some background check companies that don’t require a social security number, so that is an option. Also, we remind churches that while background checks are critical, they are only one piece of the child protection puzzle.

What are the common reactions to your recommendations? Do you find people reluctant to discuss the topic at all?

Due to Me Too and Church Too, there's been a shift. Most people—at least in their heads—will admit that abuse happens everywhere—church included—and that there are abuse survivors in every congregation. I know of many churches that are now incorporating child protection themes into their worship services, sermons, and Sunday school classes. The leaders of churches we've worked with generally appreciate the chance to bring in outside resources and accountability, which can help ease internal resistance to taking protection measures.

At the same time, I see churches continuing to struggle with what former pastor Jim Amstutz calls the "fatal flaw of exceptionalism." This is the mentality that assumes after an instance of abuse that "God will bless our good intentions, so we don't need to call the authorities or outside experts." The understandable impulse is to return to normal and minimize the internal and external impact. Against this temptation, Amstutz recommends: "Take time to grieve, identify what you don't know, and invite an outside resource to coach the congregation through this liminal space."

What's the biggest mistake congregations make in addressing issues of abuse?

Many of us continue to be naive about offenders, who are often skilled masters of manipulation. Dove's Nest cofounder Jeanette Harder once asked an incarcerated offender: "What should church leaders know about offenders?" He answered: "Never trust us."

Sexual abuse is rarely a onetime occurrence, and there are usually multiple victims. We tend to buy into the stranger danger myth—that someone new to our church is more threatening to children than someone we know well and love. Unfortunately, the majority of offenders are known and trusted by victims and their families.

After an instance of abuse is confirmed, a faith community should share the name of the offender publicly and provide a space for other victims to come forward. In situations of child abuse allegations, notice should be given within 48 hours to all parents whose children may have encountered the alleged offender. They need to know that allegations have been made and reported. I've found that this is often a trying task for church leaders, who worry about shaming the alleged offender. But it is necessary in order to keep community members safe.

When churches wish to welcome people who are known sexual offenders, we advise: know your limitations. Prior to creating a written safety plan or a limited-access agreement with the individual, churches should seek counsel from an outside advocacy group, conference or denominational leadership, or another appropriate organization. We also advise regular check-ins with an external group. A congregation can neither hold an offender legally accountable nor replace professional counseling and treatment.

Some survivors of abuse are passionate about helping make churches safe for children and all vulnerable people. How can church leaders identify and empower them?

We recommend reaching out to survivors, listening to their stories, and validating their experiences. A church working on policies should try to include the input of a survivor who has already disclosed this information to the church.

When church leaders become aware of an instance of abuse, how can they best support the person who has been abused?

In the initial response to a crisis, keep giving the victim short, positive messages like, “I am here for you,” “You did the right thing,” and “You’re safe now.” Victims should be at the center of any process. They should be heard, supported, and kept in the communication loop. Prioritize the victim’s needs over the offender. I’ve witnessed church leaders focus their energy and pastoral care on the offender, not the victim. That’s a temptation to resist.

When someone discloses that they have been abused in the past, do not keep that person at arm’s length, even if the thought of the abuse they’ve suffered makes you feel uncomfortable or unsure how to support them. It is often said: when we make churches safe for survivors, we make churches safer for children.

Some Christian practices—passing the peace, foot washing, communion—might make survivors uncomfortable or even trigger trauma for them. How do we address those realities?

Hilary Scarsella has written extensively about this concern. “When we say during communion that Jesus demonstrated his faithfulness to God by being willing to endure bodily harm and execution as an expression of love for the people trying to hurt him, children who are being hurt *are paying attention*,” she wrote in a Dove’s

Nest blog post in 2015. She also says that for someone who has suffered oral sexual assault by an adult man, the invitation to put Jesus' body into one's mouth is frightening and intrusive.

I encourage church leaders to strategically provide a way out, primarily by making these practices optional and giving notice to the congregation when possible. For example, pastors can check in with individuals in advance to make sure they are comfortable with the laying on of hands during a congregational time of blessing or sending.

Since the very nature of ministry is intimate, I try to incorporate a discussion on appropriate touch in most of the training. We go over the differences between good touch, bad touch, and uncomfortable touch. Uncomfortable touch makes the receiver feel uneasy, confused, or unsure. The receiver may have conflicting feelings about the touch or the person doing the touching. Many of us may feel unsure about some of the interactions we have at church. These are in the uncomfortable category.

This is true for children, preteens, and teenagers as well as adults. Whether a touch is good, bad, or confusing is determined by how the receiver experiences it, not by the intentions of the person doing the touching. Appropriate touch responds to a child's need for comfort, encouragement, or affection. It is not based on the adult's emotional need. Many children are looking for someone to listen to them and show interest in them, not for a handshake or hug.

A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title "Making church a safe place."