

Background check: Churches respond to safety concerns

by [John Dart](#) in the [June 26, 2007](#) issue

I'm still amazed," declared Mary Alice Gran, the soft-spoken national director of children's ministries for the United Methodist Church, based in Nashville. "Not all our [regional] conferences require background checks for volunteer workers, and there are congregations who are still doing nothing."

Gran said this omission is surprising since a Methodist-published how-to book, *Safe Sanctuaries: Reducing the Risk of Child Abuse in the Church*, came out in 1998 and has been followed by a flow of educational materials from the UMC board of discipleship.

That situation is common in all kinds of Protestant churches, experts say. The "do-nothing" approach may stem from budget problems, from a trust in fellow believers, or from a tradition of respecting each congregation's right to make its own decisions, including on issues of safety. The latter reason was the principal one cited this spring by national Southern Baptist leaders in response to reports about SBC ministers and seminarians with a record of sexual abuse.

Public attention to the sexual abuse of minors in the church has focused largely on the Catholic Church. But enough cases of sexual abuse in Protestant churches have surfaced in the past decade—sometimes resulting in costly legal settlements—to cause alarm.

Insurance policies now require background checks on clergy, staff and volunteers at churches and church-related organizations. Some mainline denominations in recent years have obtained discounted insurance prices for their churches and organizations by contracting with companies competing to sell their investigative skills to churches.

"The background-check business is huge," said Phill Martin, deputy CEO of the 50-year-old National Association of Church Business Administration. More than 100

firms advertise in the “suppliers guide” on the NACBA Web site (www.nacba.net). “The problem with these services is that they are not all created equally, so you have to really understand what you are purchasing,” Martin said.

Among mainline Protestants, the most popular company appears to be Oxford Document Management, based in the Minneapolis suburb of Anoka and launched in the early 1990s by Sally Johnson, then the attorney for the Episcopal Diocese of Minnesota.

Oxford is not an NACBA member, but the small firm’s clients include some 90 Episcopal dioceses, 56 synods of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, at least 13 United Methodist conferences, a half-dozen Catholic dioceses and four African Methodist Episcopal Zion districts, aside from various other church bodies and seminaries.

Early this year, the United Church of Christ and the Disciples of Christ (Christian Church) signed on with Oxford after nearly three years’ work developing procedures. “We have already screened over 500 clergy in just the first two months between the two of them,” said Chuck Koterba, director of client services. And as of April 1, Oxford became the national vendor for the Church of God, Cleveland, Tennessee.

Screening the backgrounds of clergy, including even Katharine Jefferts Schori when she was elected presiding bishop of the Episcopal Church last year, costs an average of \$225 per clergyperson, depending on how much research a client wants, Koterba said. The costs are much lower for staff and volunteers.

Some congregations, like All Saints Episcopal Church in Beverly Hills, draw virtually all staff and volunteers from within the parish. “We have seen their lives,” said Carol Anderson, rector at All Saints. For clergy hires, Anderson said, the parish uses Oxford for background checks and, in addition, interviews all the people listed as references. She said she had just learned of another parish’s “bad mistake with an earlier call.” Fortunately, that church was able to “buy him out” after six weeks, she said.

“It is very hard in my experience to get people listed as references and other folks to tell the whole story about someone,” Anderson said. “They think it seems ‘unloving or unsupportive’ to do so.” She said she believes that Episcopal dioceses are now establishing protocols to get diocesan people to “raise any red flags that might be there.”

The companies look not only for sexual-abuse violations but also for other convictions, driving violations or financial problems. In 2000, the Episcopal Diocese of Atlanta canceled the consecration of a bishop a week before the event because church officials learned of his planned separation from his wife and of his credit card debt.

Concerns for safety have added new tensions to the hiring atmosphere at churches. "We get extremely nasty notes at times from a lay leader or a chief elder who comments on our having the audacity to question an individual's character," said Oxford's Koterba. "It's as if people never read the news or realized what's going on."

Church groups known for being strict on issues of personal behavior have not escaped scandal, even though those same religious bodies also tend to admonish members not to air dirty laundry in public.

Recently 16 current or former Jehovah's Witnesses settled nine lawsuits in which they said they were sexually abused as children by Witness members or leaders. Details have been kept secret, but the settlements were announced May 10 by the watchdog group Silentlambs. Most of the cases were in California.

"For once, we have the church stepping up to the plate and having to settle with these victims," said William H. Bowen, founder of Silentlambs, which focuses on victims who claim to have been molested by Jehovah's Witnesses. Mario Moreno, the Witnesses' associate general counsel, confirmed the settlements May 11 but said he could not reveal the monetary amounts because of a confidentiality agreement.

The Southern Baptists were spotlighted in an ABC News *20/20* program in April on preachers who are predators. The program called attention to 10 SBC ministers who have been convicted of sex offenses against minors, six of whom were still listed as clergy in an online directory at SBC.net at the time of the broadcast. They include:

- Garrett Dykes of Calvary Church in Wetumpka, Alabama, who pleaded guilty to molesting an eight-year-old girl
- Larry N. Neathery of Westside Victory Baptist Church in Fort Worth, Texas, convicted of 25 charges of sexual abuse of five boys
- John O. McKay of First Baptist Church in Hondo, Texas, currently serving a 10-year sentence for sexual assault

Another firm specializing in churches is Protect My Ministry, which serves mostly conservative evangelical church organizations. “We are averaging 70 to 100 new clients each month,” said Mike Clark, the CEO of the Tampa, Florida, area company with 17 full-time staff members.

Protect My Ministry works with many individual churches in addition to serving the Colorado Springs headquarters of the Christian and Missionary Alliance. It signed a deal last year with the Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod. Some Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) presbyteries also are clients.

Clark and his chief marketing officer, Brad Snellings, are both active in Southern Baptist congregations. Their SBC clientele includes the Atlanta-based North American Mission Board, as well as the Kentucky Baptist Convention and Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Fort Worth, Texas.

Clark said his office had not been contacted, as of mid-May, by national Southern Baptist leaders who are under pressure to develop a stronger response to disclosures about sexual offenders in the ranks of clergy and youth ministers. Early this month, the Baptist General Convention of Texas made public a list of registered sex offenders currently or previously on staff at its churches. Officials posted names of eight convicted sex offenders online and said they will add to the list if new registered offenders are found at any of the 5,600 affiliated congregations. SBC president Frank Page told reporters in April that some kind of internal national directory of clergy was being proposed. The issue was expected to arise at the SBC annual meeting June 12-13 in San Antonio, Texas.

“I remember reading that Baptist leaders have told all churches they ought to do background checks,” Clark said. “A lot of churches say, ‘We don’t do it; we know everybody.’” Clark, who has worked in the screening field since 1993, issues the same warning that his competitors do: job applicants and church volunteers who have a disturbing past will often work hard to hide that background with relocations, aliases or just plain lies.

Clark commended an article on background checks that appeared in the spring issue of the NACBA magazine, written by two women with law-enforcement experience. Sandra Brewer and Chris Felicijan, who head Pinnacle Investigations, in Spokane, Washington, emphasize that databases are limited compilations from 19 states, are often not up-to-date and lack information from federal court convictions—to mention

only some of the gaps.

Contracting for the lowest level of background check is risky, they say. Courts that hear suits filed by victims expect that churches will exercise due diligence in researching an employee's background. "It is nearly impossible to explain to a jury that saving \$20 by using a limited screening service makes you exempt from a multimillion-dollar judgment," the coauthors wrote.

"It is imperative that you work with an agency that conducts court record checks in all locations where the applicant has lived," they said. A large church in the Midwest lost a \$100,000 lawsuit when the background company checked only the current location of an applicant who had a history of committing assaults.

Brewer cited the case of a church that hired a children's pastor after doing a simple database check. Only two months before he applied for the job, the pastor had been arrested for sexual assault of a child, she said. "The pastor was hired and raped a child in the new church, the court ruled that the hiring process was negligent, and the church settled out of court for \$250,000."

Felicijan noted that people who have received deferred sentences or who engaged in plea bargains to receive lesser charges may elude background searches. Moreover, a person may have used an alias or a professional or married name in addition to his or her given name. "We start with Social Security records and go to several different databases and actually go to courthouses at times," she said.

What about churches with a hundred or more employees and volunteers that plead poverty when asked to pay for background checks? "We sometimes suggest that they ask their volunteers or applicants to pay that cost themselves, explaining that this is how we can keep children safe," Felicijan said. "That works for some churches." (The firm's price for a check on a volunteer or nonclergy staffer is about \$26 per person.)

Church leaders realize that pursuing background checks is a delicate step for congregations tackling the task for the first time. Gran, the Methodist children's ministries specialist, provided tips in the March/April *Interpreter* magazine. She suggests that congregations raise the issue of safety gradually in discussions, soliciting ideas from established groups in the church.

“Pastor John” and “Miss Nancy who has worked in the nursery for 40 years” should be the first to permit background checks on themselves. “Their example makes it easier for others to say yes,” she wrote. If a church cannot afford screenings for all its staff in the first year, she recommends devising a plan to cover everyone over a period of three years.

Church safety consultant Jeff Hanna, who has conducted seminars for NACBA, said in an interview: “I hate to be blunt, but the bottom line for churches is that they want it cheap and easy to use.

“And actually, that’s not all bad,” he added. “So many churches are not doing these checks at all, so those that reach out and find a company to conduct them are ahead of the game.”

Hanna, president of Iowa-based Ministry Continuity Solutions, said, “No company can guarantee a 100 percent accurate check, because so many municipalities and states simply don’t supply the data completely.” While not discounting the value of more-than-minimal background screening, Hanna said that many churches have “a false sense” that such efforts will be enough.

Equally important, he went on to say, is having written guidelines that call for reference checks, interviews, solid supervision, training and—if it comes to that—reporting of an offense to proper law authorities.

The Chicago presbytery of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), for example, has guidelines dealing with both child safety and clergy misconduct. Hired to help churches connect with background-check services is Loretta Gratias-Bremer, a Christian educator whose title is consultant-coordinator for misconduct prevention. “I say there is no right way or wrong way to do it; please just do it,” she said. “It’s worth every penny to keep people safe.”