

The Child Safety Policy

A Case Study in Church Conflict

As the upcoming congregational meeting approaches, all parties are a bit uneasy. How will it go? What decision will be made and what will the fall-out of the decision be?

About two years ago, a group of parents headed by Frank started talking about the need for the church to have a child safety policy. In light of the tragic instances of child abuse that have taken place in some churches, Frank and others wanted to put some structures in place to maximize the safety of the church children. They felt that the church should have policies in place regarding issues such as the minimum number of adults that should be with children at any given time, length of time a person needed to be part of the church before volunteering in children's programs, and background checks. They worked hard to put a policy together and they brought it to a congregational meeting in June, 2006 with the hope of having it approved.

The discussions in that congregational meeting were intense. Some felt that this policy was fear-driven, and they didn't want that to become the ethos of the church. One person in particular, George, reacted strongly against the policy proposal that background checks be done on all volunteers in addition to staff members. George is a public defender and based on his experience he said that background reports often include erroneous information. He also felt that the use of background checks was a way of giving responsibility to the government that should be retained by the church. He felt that the use of background checks for all volunteers would fundamentally change the tone of the congregation by creating an atmosphere of distrust and fear. The proposal was sent back to the task force for further work.

Over the next year the task force held a series of listening sessions to hear people's ideas on the child safety policy. At a congregational meeting in June the policy was discussed again. Frank and about ten others felt strongly that the full policy should be implemented fully. George and two others felt strongly that the background checks should not be done on volunteers. The other forty people were scattered across the spectrum, though the weight was definitely toward supporting the full policy.

This church uses a consensus model of decision making. So for a policy like this to pass, all must agree to it (or at least say that they are willing not to block it).

George is very upset about the situation. The on-going discussions about this policy have made him feel alienated, though he says that all the people involved have been very nice to him. He is not sure he and his family can stay at this church if this policy is put in place. Frank feels so strongly that this policy is the right way to go that he is not sure he and his family will stay at the church if the policy is not adopted.

The congregational meeting will be held this Sunday after the worship service. The church leadership team feels that this whole process of working on the child safety policy has drawn down a lot of energy from the church. Regardless of what decision is reached on Sunday, the leadership team feels like it is important for the congregation to move on to other things.