Safe churches a priority for Adventist Risk Management
With ‘Child Protection Plan,’ local leaders can better protect kids

The One Project makes Jesus center of theology
Gathering of 700 Jesus seekers grew from meeting of five friends in 2010
A new child protection program from the Seventh-day Adventist Church’s risk management organization is galvanizing the church’s ongoing efforts to shield minors from abuse and misconduct.

Through training for adults and children, as well as background screening for employees and volunteers who work closely with minors, Adventist Risk Management’s Child Protection Plan equips local leaders to make the church a safe place, says ARM Vice President and Chief Risk Management Officer Arthur Blinci.

“It’s part of our mission to help protect the ministries of the Seventh-day Adventist Church,” says Blinci, citing Children’s Ministries, Youth Ministries, Pathfinders and Adventurers as a “core component” of that mission. “Faith-based communities have a moral, ethical and legal responsibility to protect children from harm when they’re in our care,” he says.

The church has made significant strides toward achieving that goal. In North America, many church employees and volunteers are mandated reporters, Blinci says. This means they have a legal obligation to report abuse or allegations of abuse that occur within the church setting. By 2003, the church’s North American Division had drafted protocol for dealing with sexual misconduct and child abuse. Late last year, the division voted a new child protection policy mandating that every level of church administration implement a training and screening program for volunteers.

The Adventist world church has also been proactive about writing guidelines and voting policies to protect minors. Indeed, at the church’s General Conference Session in 2010, delegates voted to add to the Church Manual specific language guiding the appointment of church employees and volunteers who work closely with minors. They agreed that adults leading out in Pathfinders, Vacation Bible School, Children’s Ministries and Sabbath School programs “must meet church and legal standards and requirements, such as background checks or certification.”

Still, Blinci says that policies, guidelines and good intentions only go so far. Adventist Risk Management routinely handles a couple dozen cases of child abuse every year and has spent some $30 million on indemnity cases over the past two decades. Many U.S. states have open statutes of limitations, allowing older claims of abuse to be raised and litigated.

What the church needs are tools and resources to put in the hands of local church administrators and leaders, he says.

“We’ve heard for so many years from church members, ‘How do we do it?’” Blinci says.

Now Adventist Risk Management is providing an answer. Through a partnership with Shield The Vulnerable, the organization has developed practical methods of training and screening employees and volunteers who work closely with minors. [photo: iStockphoto]
Vulnerable, the organization’s new Child Protection Plan offers online training for adults on addressing abuse, neglect, predators, bullying, boundaries and respect. It also provides age-appropriate information for children on recognizing and reporting abuse.

Shield The Vulnerable -- a California-based service provider that frequently works with faith-based, non-profit organizations -- also offers background screening for employees and volunteers as a “critical” line of defense, Blinci says.

“So often, especially on the volunteer side, there’s typically no screening. You want to volunteer for Children’s Ministries? Great, come on, we can use you,” he says. “Now, when potential volunteers know before they even apply that you’re going to run a criminal background check, if they have a propensity, they’re not even going to volunteer.”

While creating the Child Protection Plan, ARM discovered that the church’s Lake Union Conference had already partnered with Shield The Vulnerable and piloted its training and screening programs in the U.S. states of Illinois, Indiana, Michigan, Wisconsin and a portion of Minnesota.

Blinci expects all 59 of the North American Division’s conferences will follow suit in the coming months. Through Shield The Vulnerable, a conference or other administrative unit creates an account that tracks progress as they train volunteers and perform background screenings. “It goes all the way down to the local church and school level,” he says.

ARM resource kits for local churches include PowerPoint presentations, a video clip, a sample child protection policy and reference information.

While North American Division policy doesn’t mandate the use of Shield The Vulnerable, it does require some type of training and screening. “There are other ways a conference may choose to do their own training and orientation, but they have to do something,” Blinci says.

“Abuse of children is not only prevalent in society, but is also occurring within our churches,” says Phyllis Washington, Children’s Ministries director for the North American Division. “By recognizing that the problem exists in our congregations, we are taking a crucial step toward providing a safe environment, restoring trust, promoting healing and ultimately preventing child abuse.”

While the Shield The Vulnerable program may not fully apply to the world church due to differences in reporting laws, some of its elements are universally relevant and can be tailored to fit local needs, Blinci says.

“The goal is to protect our kids, which are the greatest resources we have. Hopefully now there are no excuses.”

Click here to download Child Protection Plan resources and references from Adventist Risk Management.

The One Project makes Jesus center of theology
Sam Leonor, senior chaplain at La Sierra University, at The One Project in Seattle on February 14. He referenced the 1888 General Conference Session in Minneapolis, saying, "From that meeting, Adventists emerged re-focused on Jesus: crucified, living, and coming again." [photo: Delwin Finch]

Lisa Clark Diller, chair of the Department of History at Southern Adventist University, reads from the Bible at The One Project in Seattle, February 14. "I was born into a Seventh-day Adventist home, an environment where we knew Adventists were 'right'. Since then, I've learned the wisdom of having Jesus and being right," she said. [photo: Darren Heslop]
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Seattle, Washington, United States
Ansel Oliver/ANN

The annual gathering of The One Project has its roots in Japhet De Oliveira’s 2009 cancer diagnosis, which he says was a wake-up call.

With the threat of a worsening sickness looming over him, De Oliveira met with a support group for two days in a Denver hotel in 2010. He and four fellow pastors revealed and examined issues in their lives. Now, his cancer in remission, De Oliveira has seen that small group grow into an annual gathering of hundreds of Seventh-day Adventists seeking to reconnect with Jesus in their personal and corporate worship.

This year’s gathering of The One Project on February 13 and 14 brought more than 700 people to Seattle for conversations on practical applications of Jesus’ ministry in their own lives, churches and communities. De Oliveira hopes it’s an environment where people can honestly look at their own priorities, examine the core of Christianity, and promote Jesus in their theology as Seventh-day Adventists.

For some, it’s a place to challenge and even question one’s own beliefs.

“We’re trying to create a safe place to say Jesus is the center of our church and always has been,” said De Oliveira, chaplain for missions at Andrews University in Berrien Springs, Michigan. He’s especially looking to support those who may become frustrated with the church.

“We love our church. I really do believe that God has called the Seventh-day Adventist Church and I’m tired of losing people when we work so hard to bring them in,” he said.

The One Project is short on programming and long on discussions. De Oliveira says the event format grew out of his wish to make a gathering similar to the best part of the numerous conferences he attends each year – talking with people individually. A small stage is set in the middle of a banquet room and speakers are allowed 20 minutes to present. The event is then geared toward the 40 minutes of discussion at each table following the speaker.

“I go to so many conferences and so many meetings and honestly the best part is meeting with someone over lunch,” De Oliveira said. “We didn’t want to have another event that’s packed with programming all day.”

The gathering is also short on exhibitors. The only ones allowed are publishers.

“By reading people will learn and change and transform their lives,” De Oliveira said.
Sam Leonor, senior chaplain at La Sierra University, highlighted the 1888 meeting of the Adventist world church body at General Conference Session in Minneapolis, Minnesota, when leaders discussed righteousness by faith. “From that meeting in 1888, Adventists emerged re-focused on Jesus: crucified, living, and coming again,” Leonor said.

Dr. David Kim, a family practice physician from Atlanta, said The One Project gathering was long overdue. “I grew up in a legalistic Adventist culture where the three R's dominated – rules, regulations, and rituals. Missing was the biggest R of Christianity – a relationship with Jesus.”

The original meeting in Denver in July of 2010 brought the five pastors together for support and soul searching. De Oliveira admits he had “sort of lost [his] way,” focusing on success as a pastor and not caring enough for his family or health. “I would only read the Bible to prepare sermons,” he said.

The original five were De Oliveira; Leonor; Alex Bryan, pastor of Walla Walla University Church; Tim Gillespie, young adult pastor at Loma Linda Church; and Terry Swenson, senior chaplain at Loma Linda University.

It was a real honest conversation,” De Oliveira said. “Some crying and a lot of praying. We said, ‘let’s do this at least once a year.’”

The group agreed to meet annually to focus on Jesus. Each invited friends for a similar meeting the following year in Atlanta. More than 170 people showed up.

For that 2011 gathering in Atlanta, participants may not have fully understood what they were coming to, De Oliveira said. They were each asked to read the four gospels and the book Desire of Ages, authored by Adventist Church co-founder Ellen G. White. The invitation then was simply, “Come have a two-day conversation about Jesus.”

The conversation continues later this year in Australia and Denmark, and next year in Chicago. For more information, visit: the1project.org.

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