

October 1, 2006 Mark 9:38-50

by Douglas Harding

## Safe Sanctuaries

This morning I'm going to talk about a subject many prefer not be mentioned in church. So bear with me this morning. When I first entered ministry, I remember a church losing a lawsuit and paying out a large settlement. The lawsuit was filed by the parents of a teenager who had committed suicide. The youth pastor had been counseling their son. Mom and Dad sued their church and the pastor for causing their son's death, and won. It cost the church because at that time most standard church insurance policies did not have a counseling liability clause.

I soon got a insurance policy with counseling liability coverage. To protect myself and my family, because the church did not. I still carry that policy. Fortunately I have never had to use it.

Today church policies include that kind of coverage. As a matter of fact church insurance policies now offer coverage for things we never thought about 25 years ago. I speak specifically of sexual abuse, abuse often foisted upon children and youth by adults trusted to lead them in ministry.

Next Saturday a workshop will be held on our district, a very important workshop. Titled *Safe Sanctuaries*, it is about *Reducing the Risk of Abuse in The Church*. The workshop teaches us how to protect the most precious responsibility we have as a church, our children and our youth.

You might be thinking, "nothing bad has ever happened at my church! Why do we need to establish policies and guidelines involving reducing the risk of child/youth abuse at my church?" And the United Methodist Church's response is because we do not want anything bad to ever happen at your church. One way you can help this to be true is by being prepared and having a plan.

Safe Sanctuaries is about being prepared and thinking ahead. It is not about limiting ministry. It is about doing ministry safely with children, youth and the adults who work with them.

Lets try an example: Mary is an active member of Asbury United Methodist Church, a small congregation in a small town. When she took her seven-year old daughter, Denise, to her church school classroom, they found it empty. The teacher wasn't there. Mary leaves Denise there and goes in search of the teacher. You walk by the room and notice Denise there alone. What do you do?

- 1) Say hello and keep on walking
- 2) Stand in the doorway and visit with Denise until her mother returns or the teacher arrives.
- 3) Go to the Fellowship Hall for a cup of coffee and take Denise.

The correct response is #2 – You can have a conversation with her, staying in a place that is visible to anyone else in the area to protect yourself from false accusation. Even when the teacher arrives, it is good to stay with the teacher until a second adult arrives. As a follow-up to this experience, encourage church leaders to develop policies and training to assure teachers and parents are aware of safety procedures.

Safe Sanctuaries has a Local Church Self-Evaluation Form which can determine what needs to be done to grow a Safe Sanctuaries environment at our church. It can help assess our needs for a policy for the prevention of abuse in our church's ministry with children and youth.

- We screen and check references for all paid employees, including clergy, who have any contact with children and/or youth.
- We screen all volunteer workers for any position involving work with children and/or youth.

- We train at least annually all volunteer and/or paid workers with children/youth to understand the nature of abuse and to recognize indicators of abuse.
- We train at least annually all volunteer and/or paid workers with children/youth in how to carry out our policies to prevent abuse.
- Our workers and volunteers are informed of state law requirements regarding abuse and their responsibility for reporting incidents.
- We have a clear reporting procedure for a suspected incident of abuse that follows the requirements of our state law.
- We have insurance coverage available in case a complaint of abuse occurs.
- We have a clearly defined building usage strategy as a component of our abuse prevention plan.
- We have a clearly defined response plan to be implemented in case an allegation of abuse is made against someone in our church.
- We offer at least annual education opportunities to parents of children and youth about how to recognize and reduce risks of abuse.
- We take our policies to prevent abuse seriously, and we are committed to their enforcement for the safety and security of all our children, youth and the adults who work with them.

Safe Sanctuaries is more than guidelines, policies and procedures implemented to create an environment in which children, youth and the adults who work with them have boundaries of safe space. Safe Sanctuaries is an overt expression of a congregation in making a congregation a safe place where children and youth may experience the abiding love of God and fellowship within the community of faith.

Since 1996 The United Methodist Church has seriously worked at reducing the risk of child sexual abuse in the church. Our Iowa Annual Conference has mandated that each local church will have a policy in place by next July. The workshop next Saturday is a training event to lead us through the process. We need people to attend the workshop, then we need volunteers to work on a policy and procedures for our church to ensure children are safe when in our sanctuary.

In our Gospel lesson we find stern teaching against putting "stumbling blocks" in front of any who are seeking to follow the way of Jesus — outsiders, little ones, or even oneself. Rather than creating or tolerating stumbling blocks, disciples of Jesus are actively to remove them, even if at high cost to themselves.

The subject of sexual abuse in the church is one everyone wishes would go away. Sweep it under the rug, lock it up in the back room, but certainly don't talk about it. Especially on Sunday morning during worship. Yet it is a stumbling block, and there are ways it can be removed.

Jesus told his followers: "Salt is good, but if salt has lost its saltiness, how can you season it? Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with one another." We need to nurture church leaders who will "bear witness to the love of God and the need for justice and peace in every part of the world." Next Sunday we will hear those famous words spoken by Jesus, "let the little children come to me". I believe Jesus wants us to do everything we can to protect the children and make them safe.