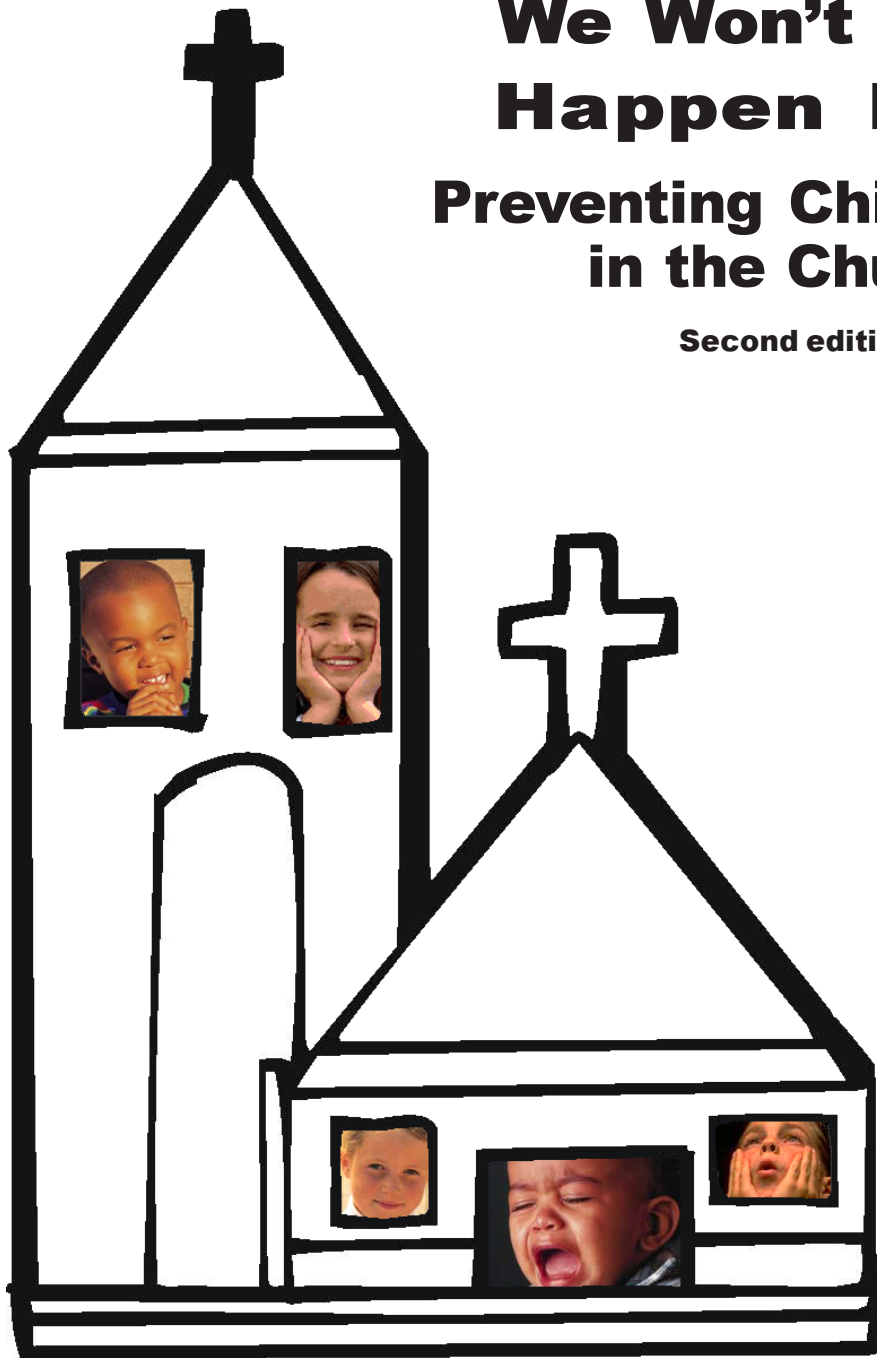


We Won't Let It Happen Here!

Preventing Child Abuse in the Church

Second edition



And Jesus took a child and put him in the midst of them; and taking the child in his arms, he said to them,
"Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me..."

— Adapted from Mark 9:36-37, RSV

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The Child Advocacy Office wishes to thank the Presbyterian Child Advocacy Network, the Presbyterian Peacemaking Program and Congregational Ministries Publishing for their contribution to the development and production of this piece.

This publication is reprinted from *Striking Terror No More: The Church Responds to Domestic Violence*, edited by Beth Basham and Sara Lisherness. Used by permission of Bridge Resources, Louisville, KY.

Presbyterian Distribution Services 1-800-524-2612
We Won't Let it Happen Here!...2nd Edition

PDS # 72-651-02-002

Developing a Policy

Jesus taught us, "Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me" (Matthew 18:5).

Children are our present and our future, our teachers, our inspiration. They are full participants in the life of the church and in the realm of God. And yet, there were over one million children who were confirmed to have been abused or neglected in the United States in 1988 (the year for which the most recent statistics are available). Studies have estimated that one of three girls and one of seven boys is sexually abused before the age of 18.

Jesus also said, "If any of you put a stumbling block before one of these little ones. ... it would be better for you if a great millstone were fastened around your neck and you were drowned in the depth of the sea" (Matthew 18:6). Our Christian Faith calls us to offer both hospitality and protection to the little ones, the children.

Tragically, churches have not always been safe places for children. Child sexual abuse, exploitation, and ritual abuse occur in churches, both large and small, urban and rural. The problem cuts across all economic, cultural and racial lines.

Such incidents are devastating to all that are involved: the child, the family, the local church, and its leaders. Increasingly, churches are torn apart by the legal, emotional, and monetary consequences of litigation following allegations of abuse.

Minimally, churches should have

- An ongoing plan for educating the congregation and its leaders on the reality of child abuse, risk factors leading to child abuse, and strategies of prevention;
- Procedures for screening staff and volunteers;
- Safety procedures for church activities;
- Directory of resources for children who have been abused and their families;
- Liability insurance that includes sexual abuse coverage; and
- Awareness and self-protection curriculum for children in the church.

Most of these issues will be addressed in more depth in a later chapter of this resource.

Developing a policy for dealing with child abuse in the church provides an opportunity for a congregation to look at all the ways in which children need to be protected in the church. This includes other safety issues besides child abuse issues, such as van maintenance, fire extinguisher placement, First Aid training, and a multitude of related issues. Some congregations end up with a "Safe Church" policy, which is broader than one that limits itself to protecting children from child sexual abuse.

An important first step in developing a policy is to check insurance coverage. There are several reasons for doing so. It is important to determine if your church is covered in the event of child abuse in the church and, if not, to decide if it is necessary to obtain a rider for such coverage. The church will also want to talk with their insurance agency about savings there might be in premium cost if the church develops and implements a "Safe Church" policy.

A "Safe Church" policy needs to address

- Insurance coverage
- Selection and screening for volunteers
- Age and gender of volunteers in different capacities (nursery, youth group)
- Number of volunteers necessary in various situations
- Safety precautions and procedures which will be put in place
- Procedure for reporting abuse
- Plan for training staff and volunteers

Most of these topics will be addressed later in this resource. There is also a list of resources that might prove helpful in this process.

In developing your church's policy, it will be important to consult legal advice about screening applications and interviews. It will also be important to become acquainted with your state's child abuse laws and reporting procedure.