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## Many Churches Neglect to Screen Those Working with Children and Youth

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November 6, 2007

(Ventura, CA) - The safety of children and youth in congregational settings has come to the forefront of the nation's attention in recent years. Stories about abuse, church cover-ups, massive lawsuits, congregational disillusionment, and - most importantly - the lives of young victims themselves, have become all-too-common in today's scandal-laced society.

Yet, despite all of this attention, many church leaders admit that their congregation does not thoroughly evaluate the background or references of those who work with children and youth. A new Barna study commissioned by GuideOne Insurance among more than 600 pastors explores this element of child and youth safety in Protestant congregations, as well as other things churches do - and don't do - to protect attenders.

### Background Checks

Screening youth and children's workers is a hit-or-miss practice in today's churches. One out of every four pastors (23%) admitted their congregation has little or no protective screening processes for the people working with young people. That equates to more than 70,000 Protestant congregations that do not give sufficient attention to protecting young people.

Slightly more than half of all pastors gave their church high marks for doing "thorough background or reference checks of the people working with children and youth" (57% said this description was a "very accurate" of their church). However, another one-fifth of pastors (20%) described their efforts as merely "somewhat" thorough.

Larger churches are generally more vigilant than smaller ministries. For instance, churches

with more than 250 adult attenders were the most likely to evaluate workers very carefully (78%), while congregations of less than 100 adults were the least likely to engage in such practices (49%). About three-fifths of mid-sized churches (attendance of 100 to 250, 62%) said their church is well described by such practices.

Many other subgroup differences emerged when it came to doing a thorough job of evaluating children's and youth workers. Congregations in the West (75%) were more likely than those in the Northeast (60%), South (56%), or Midwest (50%) to report strong levels of such screening. Churches comprised primarily of white attenders (54%) were less likely to report security screening than were congregations with primarily non-white individuals (69%). Churches led by a pastor who had graduated from a seminary were slightly more likely than congregations whose pastor lacked a seminary degree to pursue security measures (60% versus 51%).

In terms of age and experience, churches pastored by Baby Boomers (ages 43 to 61) more frequently took part in security checks (60%) than did Protestant ministries led by pastors from the Baby Bust generation (52% among pastors 42 or under) or those older than Boomers (55% among those 62 or older). Similarly, those in full-time ministry for fewer than 10 years were less likely to claim thorough worker-screening (50%) than were ministry veterans of 10 years or more (61%).

### **Planning and Communicating**

The study shows that many churches struggle with screening children's and youth workers partly because they do not have the appropriate practices and procedures in place to anticipate and deal with diverse types of risk. For instance, one-third of pastors said their church has no formal risk management process in place, and just 38% of all churches gave their organization high marks on this factor. About three out of 10 pastors indicate their church has a risk management process in place, but the pastor is less than fully satisfied with that process.

Fewer than half of pastors said their church "specifically and regularly evaluates safety and security issues affecting the church" (39%) and only one-quarter said their church "thoroughly communicates with attenders about safety and security issues" (28%).

One of the fascinating gaps related to these practices is fire preparedness. Only 2% of Protestant churches have conducted a fire drill or practice evacuation in the past month and only 12% have done so in the past year. This is particularly noteworthy because one-quarter of churches (25%) incorporate some form of fire (e.g., candles) into their worship services every month and two-thirds of all churches (64%) use open flames every year. Dozens of churches suffer significant losses from fire every year, for reasons ranging from carelessness to arson.

### **Perspective on the Research**

David Kinnaman, who directed the study, pointed out the urgency of protecting children and churches. "One of the most common questions we're asked by churches is how to attract new people. Our research consistently shows that how a church treats children is one of the keys to drawing and retaining new families. Sadly, churches expose themselves to all kinds of potential problems by failing to screen the people who will have contact with and responsibility for the children of strangers during church events. There is a level of trust that newcomers as well as long-time members place in the capacity of a church to provide comprehensive care for their children. In an age when information is plentiful, and some of the information available suggests that screening youth workers is an uncomfortable but necessary drill, even small congregations need to enhance their efforts in this important area."

"A good screening process is not a simple one-time decision about a potential worker. Once a person is screened 'in' and allowed to assist with children or youth, that does not make them immune to future problems; ongoing accountability is important as well. Similarly, people who are screened 'out' deserve love and respect as human beings."

Kinnaman, president of The Barna Group, further noted that as denominations struggle to redefine their role in the church world, assisting member churches - especially smaller congregations - in the implementation of a range of safety practices would be a worthwhile value-added component they could offer.

### Research Details

The data in this report are based on a nationwide telephone survey conducted by The Barna Group among a nationally representative sample of 613 Senior Pastors of Protestant churches. The PastorPollSM survey was conducted in November 2006. The maximum margin of sampling error associated with the aggregate sample of adults is  $\pm 4.1$  percentage points at the 95% confidence level. People in the 48 continental states were eligible to be interviewed and the distribution of those individuals coincided with the geographic dispersion of the U.S. population. Multiple callbacks were used to increase the probability of including a reliable distribution of qualified individuals.

This research was commissioned by GuideOne Insurance, one of the nation's largest church insurers, headquartered in West Des Moines, Iowa [www.guideone.com](http://www.guideone.com)

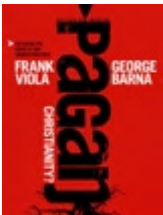
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