



Safe Shepherding

It was a typical gorgeous San Diego morning. I eagerly anticipated going with my son on a school field trip to the world-famous San Diego Zoo. We boarded the school bus full of kindergartners and their fifth grade lunch buddies. The field trip was a thank-you gesture to the fifth graders for mentoring the kindergartners through the year. They would also be aides to the chaperones who would be responsible for the kindergartners in a literal jungle of animals and people alike. The bus was alive with conversations, singing, and anticipation of a day at the zoo.

As we neared the zoo, the teachers carefully explained the rules for the day and assigned chaperones for each small group. I was a little shocked when I heard that each adult chaperone would alone be responsible for three kindergartners and three fifth graders. Being the sole chaperone of six kids seemed fraught with risk. The teachers labeled each child with a name tag for easy recognition. Everyone agreed to a designated meeting place and time to catch the bus back to school. If we had any problem with any child, we could check back there and a teacher would be present to help.

That was it! Here are “your” kids. Meet “us” back here at this time.

Quickly my mind raced to issues such as how to handle bathroom runs with a mixed group. What if we needed to contact a teacher in an emergency? Did someone have a cell phone? Were there any “special instructions” for any child? To be honest, I was growing more concerned as a parent and a chaperone as this field trip unfolded.

Quickly I gathered my group of three kindergartners and three fifth grade aides: four boys and two girls. The fifth graders could be helpful; however, I realized that they, too, wanted to enjoy the zoo. Did I mention that I was the only adult?

We identified the sites that everyone wanted to see, laid out a map, and planned the day to be able to see everything that everyone wanted to see. We agreed to make “group bathroom runs.” Everyone goes at the same time; therefore, no one is in the bathroom alone. The fifth graders were responsible for making sure that their kindergarten counterparts were with them at all times. We set out, the fifth graders in the lead and me bringing up the rear, constantly counting heads to make sure there were six.

We started at the petting zoo and moved on to the reptile house. We lunched at the Wegeforth Bowl for the sea lion show and then took a leisurely walk through the rain forest on the way to the bird aviary. We were fast approaching the end of the field trip. We only had the elephants and rhinoceroses to visit on our way to the designated gathering spot. It was a perfect execution of my plan.

We were within 100 yards of completing our trek when someone yelled, "Let's go see the koalas!" What could it hurt? They weren't in our plan, but we had some time before we had to be at the meeting place.

"Let's go see them," I yelled. In we went and out we came. One, two, three, four, five . . . , where was six? Who was missing?

I quickly posted the two older fifth grade boys at the exit and entrance to the exhibit, and took the rest with me up the ramp to see if we could find "Bobby." Where could he be? We searched throughout the exhibit. We searched the store at the bottom of the exit. We rechecked the exhibit, and even began to ask if anyone had seen Bobby.

I quickly gathered the group. Hand-in-hand, we hurried to the designated meeting place. All the time, I scoured the crowd for Bobby, our missing child. Once there, I turned the five remaining children over to one parent that I remotely knew. I told her that Bobby was missing and asked her to send a teacher when one arrived.

I doubled backed to the koalas and scrutinized every inch of the place as well as the face of every child in the exhibit. I left word at the store to look for a little boy named Bobby. Then I headed back down the path to the meeting place and recognized a teacher on the way.

My words were quick and succinct: "I have lost Bobby." The teacher thought for a moment and said, "Bobby who?" I exasperatingly replied, "I don't know, just Bobby in Ms. Smith's class, the one with the big bruise on his forehead."

Thankfully, she remembered the child and started off to look for him. Meanwhile I went to zoo security to report the incident and ask for help in our search. The security staff was quick to help, but I was of little assistance as I realized again how little I knew about this child. He was simply Bobby from Ms. Smith's class, a kindergartner with a large bruise on his forehead. Wasn't that enough to go on in one of the world's largest zoos, full of people, mainly kids? The security staff reassured me that they would alert zoo staff to keep an eye out for this child.

Again I returned to the koala exhibit, the last place I had seen Bobby. I realized how late it was. Many of the students would be leaving the zoo. I decided to stand still and watch the crowd heading to the exits.

Along came Bobby, happily oblivious to my panic. He had joined a friend in another group, and they were coming back to the bus as planned.

I grasped his hand and asked where he had gone. He innocently replied that he had gone back to see if the elephants were all right. The elephants were the last stop our group had made



before Bobby disappeared at the koalas. Gently squeezing his hand, I said a prayer of thanks for his safe return as we walked with the others back to the bus.

Bobby had a great time on the field trip. I did not. Losing Bobby and finding him again took place within 10 minutes. It was literally one of the worst 10 minutes of my life to date. Where was this child for whom I was responsible? Who was he and what was his last name? What raced through my mind that day in those 10 minutes was sheer panic. Even after I found him, terrifying thoughts of what could have happened plagued my mind for days. It was exhausting and too much for me to handle. I simply had to leave it with God and rejoice that Bobby was OK, and never realized how perilous the situation could have been.

I saw Bobby yesterday at my son's "family lunch day" at school. He had no idea how glad I was to see him there. Those 10 minutes are a stark reminder of the responsibility that I have for the children in my ministry. The episode is a painful reminder of the "burden of responsibility" parents place on us when they entrust us with their children. Children are not only in our spiritual care but in our physical care as well. I hesitate to use the word, but the "terror" I felt when Bobby was lost reminds me how parents might feel if their child was lost in our care.

I never want to be as helpless and uninformed as I was that day at the zoo. Thank You, Lord, for the reminder of the responsibility I have to children as a pastor and a parent.

Perspective Check

Children are a precious gift from God. I love the picture of Jesus in Mark 10:13-16 when He said, "'Don't push these children away. Don't ever get between them and Me. These children are the very center of life in the Kingdom.' . . . Then gathering the children up in His arms, He laid His hands of blessing on them" (TM). This is just one of many references in the Bible that speaks of how Jesus views kids in the Kingdom.

Children and families are a gauge of the health of a church. They represent present growth, future growth, longevity, vibrancy, innocence, and health.

Baby boomers are coming back to church and bringing with them a renewed emphasis on kids: their kids. Their reasons are varied as they seek a solid foundation on which to raise their kids. Are we as a church ready?

Sensitizing—"Do We See What They See?"

20/20 recently aired a segment titled "The Last Great Candy Store." The teaser was about the abuse of kids in society. This was an exposé of predators and pedophiles at large in our communities. I sat with baited breath throughout the commercials praying that the next segment would not be about churches. Thankfully it was not. It was about "little leagues" such as soccer, baseball, or basketball. Many situations of abuse and mistreatment of kids have occurred in this venue where there is little or no screening of the adults who volunteer for positions of authority. Children's leagues depend on volunteers to be coaches and support personnel that make the leagues possible. Most people do not realize the dangers kids face when we allow volunteerism without screening and accountability. The church's open-door policy invites unbelievers and believers alike. This makes screening workers crucial to safeguard our kids, our ministry, and the Kingdom.

Are Churches Any Different?

Are churches any different? Not really. Ministries depend on volunteers to support all the programs and keep them viable. My first thought after watching 20/20's "The Last Great Candy Store" was relief. Thank You, Lord, that it wasn't the church. Or was it?

The word "last" in the title rang out in my mind. Have we been given a chance to guard the door? Is the church already an aisle in the candy store? The news stories about child abuse in the Catholic Church suggest that churches are not immune from this kind of abuse. While we pray for our sister church through this ordeal, and pray for healing for the children and priests involved, we may secretly breathe a sigh of relief that it is not "our church" or "our kids"! However, we should always remember that without proper safeguards it could be our church and our kids.



Size-Wise Insight

Does church size matter when it comes to protecting kids from abuse? The answer is "Yes and no." Here's how: churches of different sizes have different personalities. Large churches may feel like malls with something for everyone. Intermediate churches feel more like neighborhoods while small churches have a family feel. Most people can recognize the dangers of crowded malls with lots of strangers. Security seems like a common-sense precaution for megachurches. "Of course *they*' need safeguards!"

What about neighborly and family-style churches? "Everyone knows everyone else, right? So why bother?" An "it can't happen in our church" attitude is one of the greatest dangers. It lulls congregations into a false sense of security. Most of the abuse exposed in Catholic churches did not happen in megachurches. The unthinkable happened in medium to small congregations by some of the most trusted members of the congregation.

Child abuse thrives in an atmosphere of unquestioning trust. Once abuse surfaces, most react with shock and surprise. Onlookers often describe abusers as "charming, kind, and friendly." Abuse feeds on the confidence of others. Perhaps simply because they are so close and trusting, medium to small churches are prime targets for abuse. It's wise to adopt child protection policies for churches from the smallest to the largest.

Size matters because the need for security may be more obvious in large churches. Size also matters in the way you adapt polity to fit your church. Church size does not matter because child abuse is an "opportunistic sin" that will strike at churches of any size. It seeks the path of least resistance and naturally gravitates to churches that have little or no security in place.

Back to the Bible—Let's Check the Operations Manual

"Stay alert! This is hazardous work I'm assigning you. You're going to be like sheep running through a wolf pack, so don't call attention to yourselves. Be cunning as a snake, inoffensive as a dove" (Matt. 10:16, TM). "Whoever becomes simple and elemental again, like this child, will rank high in God's kingdom. But if you give them a hard time, bullying or taking advantage of their simple trust, you'll soon wish you hadn't" (18:5-6, TM).

In Matt. 10:16 we are told the work can be hazardous and later in Matthew God warns of the consequences for taking advantage of a child. The Bible is clear when it comes to kids and



the Kingdom. With this in mind, the Bible can serve as a manual to create safeguards for children's ministries, your church, and the Kingdom.

The Business of Church and Church Business

I have seen so many people get the terms mixed up and fall down on this one. I always read a quote from the book *God Is Not Fair* by Joel A. Freeman, to the incoming paid staff members and volunteers in our ministry. "The closer one gets to the center of an organization, particularly a spiritual one, the more apt they are to be disillusioned spiritually."*

Many people think that working or volunteering at church is going to be like a week at Christian camp or a perpetual church service. We'll sit around singing "Kum Ba Ya," praying and ministering to people completely absorbed in the business of church! While this does occur, it isn't the situation all the time. There are budgets, deadlines, performance reviews, people calling, e-mailing, or stopping by to chat just needing a few minutes of your workday. You can become disillusioned and your vision of doing God's work is shattered with the reality of conducting church business.

This *LifeStream* manual is a tool to guide you in conducting church business while still maintaining the business of church. How does your church safeguard against potentially harmful events that could affect your kids, volunteers, church, and ultimately the name of Christ and His kingdom? Is your ministry proactive or reactive? Church business involves human resources and logistics. Is it pretty? Not always. Is it necessary? Yes! Is it church work? Yes! Is it Kingdom work? Absolutely!

The story of the paraplegic man being lowered through the roof by his friends to Jesus is a Bible classic. It is a true picture of faith, friendship, love, and salvation: an excellent example of the business of church at its best.

Have you ever wondered who fixed the hole in the roof? Someone repaired that hole. That's church business. There is a reason for roofs: protection from the elements. What you get from this manual will be like that person who repaired the roof. It is necessary, behind-the-scenes, and foundational.

Insurance for Church Business

Can't live with it, can't live without it. When I was rear-ended by an uninsured motorist I was thankful for my insurance company. I have also dinged a few vehicles myself and was thankful once again for my insurance company.

When it involves your church and safeguarding your kids, the insurance company that requires that screening procedures be put into place is the one you want. Some insurance companies will have a set of guidelines already in place for you to follow. Many also have employed the services of, or can recommend, background-checking companies and may be able to secure these services at reduced cost.

God has let us know that we will always be under authority. While directly under His authority, we are also to submit to governing officials and their laws. They are not here without God's approval. Partnering with them is not only a worldly mandate but a godly mandate as well.

Proactive vs. Reactive

I'm reminded of the old adage, "It takes years to build credibility and minutes to ruin it." This manual is about creating a good offense, not a hasty defense. Rather than waiting until something drastic happens and lamenting about it, take steps to safeguard your ministry.

I have found in our church that when it comes to our children's ministry, it is our high-quality program that attracts the seeker. We pour hours of work into preparing for what my pastor says is our bread and butter, "Sunday to Sunday."

We provide a phenomenal place of worship for our kids, from preschool to elementary. The place screams, "We love kids," from the carpets in the classrooms to the child-size rest rooms. When families come to our church we want them to think, "Wow, my child will like it here." And while their mouths are open, we fill them with the gospel.

Once we've "wowed" them, we close the back door with our policies and procedures regarding security. Parents' reactions range from amazement to assurance as they realize that we place the highest importance on their child's safety. We know how important the message of the gospel is to parents and we validate their decision to bring their children to church as well. We want parents to rest assured that their children will receive quality care and be touched by the gospel, creating a memory that will affect them for eternity.

Putting Policies and Procedures in Place

You probably feel like the dog that caught the car and doesn't know what to do with it. We felt the same way when we started out. Did it seem monumental? Of course. Think of this as eating an elephant—one bite at a time. That is exactly how we started our journey. Are we there yet? No. It seems that this thing is like a perpetual science project, "It's alive!" It changes and morphs as situations arise. However, the words I once despised and loathed; the very opposite of my personality—POLICIES and PROCEDURES—have now become a liberating phrase.

No longer is our ministry reacting to situations, but we are responding. We have a framework to work within, a guide to refer back to, and a point of reference from which to begin. Without policies and procedures you will soon find yourself run ragged trying to keep up or dragged along unsure of which way to turn.

Begin to define your ministry's parameters. Creating policies and procedures can be like cleaning out the garage. The task may so overwhelm your team that you may want to throw in the towel. Start at the top and work down. Divide the responsibilities. You will soon discover that many of your volunteers will begin to find a new niche, creating wonderful opportunities for your children's ministry to grow. Start with an understanding of the basics in the following chapters. Assess and create accordingly.

You can do this . . . for the kids and the Kingdom!

*Joel Freeman, *God Is Not Fair* (Green Forest, Ark.: New Leaf Press, 1993), 86-87.