

FIRST BAPTIST CHURCH



HOW ONE CHURCH CREATED A COMMUNITY OF PROTECTION

2020 CHILD PROTECTION CASE STUDY



THE ISSUE

First Baptist Church* felt they had done everything right. To work in children and student ministries, volunteers and staff had to undergo an extensive application process, interview(s), and background checks on both a national and state level. They had child protection policies and procedures in place. And yet, a few years ago they learned that one of the children they served had been the victim of child sexual abuse by one of their volunteers. Like other stories of abuse, the volunteer was someone the community trusted. He fit the 'gold standard' for volunteers - he showed up and did everything he was asked.

This forced the church leadership to dig deeper to learn how they could do more for the safety of their community. They had to reflect and ask challenging questions. What more could they have done to protect the children in their care? How could they have prevented this? How could they better educate their staff, volunteers, and parents to create a community of protection for their children?

THE MOVEMENT

Following the incident, the church community wondered how they would be able to move forward. Reverend Smith*, the Discipleship Pastor, was dedicated to better protecting his community. It was important to Rev. Smith that whatever they did in response to the incident was not a knee-jerk reaction or forced. He wanted to be intentional to ensure that his community understood the reasons behind the changes they made. He also wanted to move past the fear that plagued his church. This is when Carol Hogue, Lead Instructor at Darkness to Light, began working with First Baptist to begin educating adults in child sexual abuse prevention.

After deciding to mandate Darkness to Light's *Stewards of Children*® child sexual abuse prevention training for all adults who work with children, Rev. Smith was challenged with communicating this mandate to his community. He made it clear they were not just 'checking a box,' but that child sexual abuse was an issue they would tackle for the sake of the children and their mission as a church.

“It’s not about ‘let’s just do this so we can have some sort of a publicity stunt.’ We’re doing this to protect you as a volunteer. We’re doing this to protect the family or the individual. We’re doing this to protect the church. We are doing this because we are truly stewards of children.”

– Reverend Smith, Discipleship Pastor

THE RESULT

After the mandate, First Baptist found that they were able to develop a culture with their volunteers, parents, and families to be more intentional about child sexual abuse prevention. Taking the training allowed Rev. Smith to recognize signs of sexual abuse that he had never realized before. *Stewards of Children*® gave the whole congregation a common language that promotes prevention, helping create a strong culture where parents feel empowered to report uncomfortable situations, staff recognize inappropriate relationships and behaviors, and volunteers can talk about child sexual abuse openly. As a result of *Stewards of Children*®, the church now has built-in accountability among all staff and volunteers, a sense of comfort



in continuing to provide services for children without fear of doing wrong, and open communication around child sexual abuse.

First Baptist has trained over 100 adults in *Stewards of Children*[®] over the last three years and continues to mandate training for all youth-serving adults. The church offers the training twice a year, once in the fall and once in the spring, with an option for volunteers to take it online if necessary. Additionally, the church began distributing a hard copy of their child protection policies to families, ensuring that everyone understands the measures the church takes to keep their children safe. Rev. Smith also spends time talking to other churches in his network about their child protection journey, lessons they've learned, and sharing their policies so that he can begin changing risk perceptions amongst the church community.

“We’re fans of Darkness to Light... I’m pretty hard to please and any type of resource is going to have to be well-vetted and *Stewards of Children*[®] is the best. It can be uncomfortable, but it’s necessary. We’re happy to be partners and will continue to be for the protection of our children and families,” says Rev. Smith.”

* Names have been altered to protect the privacy of the congregation.