

Ethics and Safety in Congregational Life

Summary Report for the UUA Board: July 2007-May 2008

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During the year ending in June 2007, a new interactive online resource to educate congregational leaders was launched with the goal of providing easily accessible training for congregational leaders in the basics of safe congregation policy with a focus on the safety of children and youth. The resource also provides information on determining whether, and if so how, to include someone who is a sexual offender in the congregational community. The 2½-hour, free course of study is based on *Balancing Acts - Keeping Children Safe in Congregations*, a resource written for the UUA and available as an online resource since 2005. Feedback from those taking the new online course has been overwhelmingly positive. As of December 31, 2007, 336 people had taken the course, with the vast majority indicating that the self-paced course is well-organized and communicates the essential points of creating safe congregations policies.

Requests for copies of our *Congregational Safety Packet* continue to come in regularly, many as a result of the on line course. (Participants in the course are provided information on requesting this packet of supplementary materials.)

On line course use and packet requests include folks from various denominations and from social service agencies. Praise for these resources is consistently high.

A change worthy of note over the past three plus years is that inquiries regarding our resources are no longer coming almost exclusively from the DRE but are now as likely to come from a committee chair or other lay leader, and often these folks are involved in writing safety policy at the congregational level. *Safe Congregations* has the attention of more of our congregational leaders and that has led to more congregations working on these issues.

Other inquiries for resources and support addressed concerns such as developing sexual harassment policies; determining whether or not to include in the congregation a person with a history of sex offenses, how to share information with a congregation (what to say, to whom, how and when; and how to maintain both transparency and confidentiality appropriately.)

Between July 2007 and mid May 2008, I have been involved in conversations about twelve (potential) complaints. All of the (potential) complaints were about ministers. Of these twelve:

- (1) Three were forwarded to Ministerial Fellowship Committee. These have in common a level of complexity and impact that is more far reaching (numbers of people

impacted, patterns of behavior, and numerous particular incidents/events to be addressed) than I have experienced before. One of these three complaints forwarded to the MFC involved sexual misconduct.

- (2) Four addressed situations in which no action is possible. In two cases, official statements were made by complainants. In a third, work is being done to understand the legacy of a ministry long ended. In the fourth, a statement was made by congregational leadership.
- (3) One has been referred to the assessment process (Ministry and Professional Leadership procedure) undertaken as a result of a negotiated resignation.
- (4) The remaining four were addressed with assistance from other UUA Staff, District Staff or other consultants and involved no complaint being filed or it was determined that the situation warranted no action.

If you have any questions or comments about this report, please email me at trobisonharris@uua.org.