



*By Jessica Noonan, Director of Operations – LEAD*

*“Who has a key to your church?” I asked, and the whole youth and family ministry team laughed. The question I should have asked is, “Who doesn’t have a key to your church?”*

They laughed because it’s common knowledge in their congregation that everyone has 24-7 access to their church and it’s likely there has never been a system in place to monitor that access.

You might be wondering, “Why wouldn’t we want congregation members to be able to get into the church whenever they want, it’s a communal space, right?”

While it’s true that our buildings provide shared space for meeting, connecting, celebrating, grieving, and sharing in life together, what I am concerned about is the vulnerability we unknowingly and unintentionally create when we don’t carefully consider and act in ways to protect the children and youth who gather there.

On this particular morning, I was with congregations for a pilot workshop developed by **LEAD** and the Texas-Louisiana Gulf Coast synod office entitled “Creating Safe Spaces.” The goal of the training is to assess the challenges and opportunities of the congregation with regard to the systems, guidelines and training of the adult leaders and the families with whom they work. It’s critical for congregations to develop safety guidelines, systems for training and screening adults, and awareness of the importance of all of these things in our faith communities.

I hear from people all the time who want their church to be a safe place for the people who gather there, and for those who are not yet there. They want to welcome and invite new people into the journey God is leading them on. They want to provide a safe place for children and youth in the congregation and the neighborhood. But how can a church be a safe place for children and youth when empty, unused rooms are not locked on a Sunday morning? When adults working with VBS and Sunday School aren’t background checked and trained? When we don’t take the time to create guidelines for what is acceptable and expected of adult leaders? Would you allow your child to go to a school where the teachers weren’t screened and trained? Why would we expect less of our congregations and ourselves?

Let’s start the conversation now.

In your congregation...

- What are the requirements and expectations of leaders working with children/youth?
- Do you have written guidelines about healthy boundaries between adults and children/youth?
- Are your adult leaders background checked and screened?
- Are your adult leaders trained on your guidelines and expectations?

**If you answered “no” to any of the above questions, it is time to talk with your church leadership about taking steps to make positive change in your congregation. It’s time to make your church a safe place for all ages.**

For more information about the Creating Safe Spaces workshop, contact [LEAD](#).

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