

## Trustees issues for Safe Sanctuaries

PORTLAND — A Portland man has filed a \$4 million lawsuit against the Franciscan Friars of California, alleging childhood sexual abuse by a priest.

In an unrelated lawsuit seeking \$3.25 million, a pastor for the Oregon Conference of Seventh-day Adventists and its Roseburg Junior Academy was accused of sexually abusing a 5-year-old girl in 1992.

The complaints were filed by Portland lawyer Kelly Clark, one of the lead attorneys in a number of sexual abuse cases against the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Portland that ended in a \$50 million settlement in 2007.<sup>1</sup>

It is the responsibility of Trustees to evaluate the insurance coverage of your church to be sure there is adequate insurance. Also, you will need to make sure there is provision in your insurance coverage for sexual misconduct and abuse. In addition to figuring out how to pay for the resulting lawsuits of allegations (justified or not) of abuse, the trustees are also responsible for any physical changes that may be needed in order to implement your Safe Sanctuary Policy.

As Joy Thornburg Melton explains in her book, *Safe Sanctuaries for Youth*, would-be abusers seek out areas that are not visually accessible. It is important that our Sunday School classrooms and Youth rooms offer protection by having full visual access to anyone walking by.

Windows in classroom doors are one option. Another cost effective method for smaller churches is to cut existing doors horizontally and adding the necessary hardware so that the top portion can remain open when the room is occupied. The technology is not extremely expensive to consider installing video cameras in each classroom. Our church did this at a cost of less than \$400 per room for the camera, recorder and monitor. This option provides the additional protection of a video record or silent witness to any questionable incident. If you use this method you should post notices that the classroom is monitored even if your cameras are obvious.

From an investment standpoint, you can consider the expense of these modifications against the cost of settling a multi-million dollar lawsuit. More important however is that you will be investing in the safety of our most precious assets, our children and vulnerable adults.

One other thing that should be seriously considered is to designate a primary and alternate spokesperson to handle inquiries from the press and public when (not if) your board of trustees need to deal with an accusation of abuse of a child or vulnerable adult.

By Randy Smith, Safe Sanctuaries Committee member, Lay person at Parkers UMC, FA District

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<sup>1</sup> Portland Register Guard, Feb. 12, 2009,

<http://www.registerguard.com/csp/cms/sites/web/news/cityregion/7512130-41/story.csp>