

Background Checks for Churches and Religious Organizations

Historically, churches have been known as places of safety and sanctuary. When the Boston Globe exposed a widespread sex abuse scandal in the Catholic Church in 2002, that impression of safety and sanctuary began to shift. Between 2001 and 2010, the Holy See—the central governing unit of the Catholic Church—investigated sex abuse allegations involving 3,000 priests and dating back half a century. In 2004, a study conducted by the John Jay Report tabulated more than 11,000 allegations in the United States against 4,392 priests.

These numbers and the scandal at the root of them exposed the need for greater oversight in churches and religious organizations. They are part of the reason background checks have become more common in these organizations since. This white paper will look at the rise of background checks in churches and religious organizations and why these vetting measures are so important.

The Rise of Background Checks in Churches

At backgroundchecks.com, we have seen the growth of background screenings for religious organizations firsthand. In 2008, we established a partnership with LifeWay Christian Resources. LifeWay is the publishing arm of the Southern Baptist Convention, a nonprofit that “reinvests income above operating expenses in mission work and other ministries around the world.” LifeWay provides resources to thousands of churches—including, for the past decade, background checks.

By 2010, less than two years after the partnership between LifeWay and backgroundchecks.com had begun, LifeWay had conducted more than 11,000 checks for 900 churches. By 2013, LifeWay had tapped backgroundchecks.com to conduct nearly 85,000 background checks for 5,000 churches. Today, a decade into the partnership, LifeWay and backgroundchecks.com have helped more than 15,000 churches and religious organizations screen their employees and job candidates.

Over the years, LifeWay’s background checks have justified themselves by alerting churches and religious organizations to red flags. In 2010, 40 percent of the checks that LifeWay ran returned some sort of hit ranging

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from driving record infractions to criminal records. Twenty-one percent of the checks identified felony or misdemeanor convictions. At that point, LifeWay checks had flagged 600 felony convictions.

By 2013, the figures were even higher: 53 percent of LifeWay's checks (accounting for almost 45,000 employees or candidates) had flagged an issue. 22.5 percent—or 19,202 checks—identified people with misdemeanor or felony convictions.

These numbers show why background checks in religious organizations are important. Not all the “issues” identified by LifeWay's background checks would justify the firing of a church employee or the disqualification of a job applicant or volunteer. Traffic infractions and some minor misdemeanors are often not relevant to a church position. However, knowing about misdemeanors and felonies is a must for churches and religious organizations—especially since LifeWay's stats prove a significant percentage of candidates in these organizations have criminal backgrounds.

Due to the LifeWay/backgroundchecks.com partnership, more churches than ever have easy access to background checks for their employees and volunteers.

Why Churches Need to Run Background Checks on Employees and Volunteers

LifeWay's statistics offer a mathematical argument for why background checks matter at churches. There are also moral, ethical, and practical arguments for why background screenings are vital in these environments.

The biggest reason background checks are a must in churches is to protect kids. Would you send your children to school if you knew that none of the teachers or support staff had been vetted properly? Church should be no different. Schools have teachers, aides, substitutes, nurses, and administrators who interact with kids unsupervised. Churches have priests, Sunday School teachers, ministry and youth group leaders, and volunteers who share the same type of unsupervised contact with kids.

The Catholic Church scandal proves just because people are religious does not mean they should be trusted blindly. Church employees and volunteers are no more above reproach or skepticism than school employees and should be held to the same hiring standards.

The second reason churches need to screen the people they hire is to protect their finances. Religious organizations are not immune to embezzlement or misappropriation of funds. According to a survey conducted by LifeWay Research, one in every 10 protestant churches has suffered some form of embezzlement. In most cases, these misappropriations of funds happen because churches put volunteers in charge of finances. From collection baskets to credit cards to bank accounts, churches trust unvetted volunteers with money, and those decisions result in the loss of thousands of dollars.

Another issue is many organizations—not just churches or religious bodies—vet their full-time employees but not their volunteers. Volunteers are part of the organizations they serve and have the potential to cause as much harm as any employee. Religious organizations are particularly vulnerable because they rely on volunteers for so many

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key functions. Regardless of the perceived level of risk, volunteer background checks matter. [Read our white paper on volunteer screenings to learn more.](#)

The potential financial implications of not running background checks can take the form of simple negligence. Churches can be sued for hiring employees who are obviously dangerous. One example is a case in Virginia in which the State Supreme Court ruled a mother could sue a church after her daughter was molested. The perpetrator of the offense was an employee the church had hired to a job that involved direct contact with children. The employee had recently been convicted of aggravated sexual assault—on another young female victim—and was on probation for the crime. The mother argued the church had been negligent in hiring this man. The court agreed, ruling that the woman could sue the church for negligent hiring.

The third reason churches should ramp up their background check practices is the rise of the #MeToo movement. #MeToo has brought issues of workplace harassment and assault to the forefront of the cultural conversation. The movement has not only amplified the frequency of allegations by victims but has also changed the way the public reacts to these allegations. In many #MeToo situations, the accused perpetrators of assault or harassment have not faced legal charges. However, they have borne the brunt of immense public backlash and condemnation. At this point, an allegation can do irreparable damage to the reputation of a public figure or organization, even if lawsuits or criminal charges never come into play.

Screening candidates thoroughly can reduce the likelihood of harmful, legally messy, and reputation-shattering workplace interactions. Religious organizations are not unique: every organization needs to make fairer and more equitable workplace interactions a priority. Background checks are a good start, because they can flag candidates who have a history of harassment or assault.

What Background Checks for Churches or Religious Organizations Should Include

What should a background check policy for a church look like? Which checks should religious organizations use to vet their employees and volunteers?

There isn't a one-size-fits-all answer, which is why backgroundchecks.com provides a service that lets churches customize their screening solutions. Typically, religious organizations use a blend of the following.

- **Criminal history checks:** We typically recommend organizations start with a criminal database search through our US OneSEARCH service. OneSEARCH is an instant-search database that includes more than 600 million criminal records from all 50 states plus Washington, D.C., Puerto Rico, and Guam. OneSEARCH also includes sex offender registry checks and terrorist watch list checks; both are vital for church background checks.

We recommend supplementing a OneSEARCH check with direct searches at county and federal courthouses. These additional checks can deepen the criminal history search in counties or districts where the subject has lived, worked, or attended school. We use Social Security Number checks to develop address histories and identify which courts to search.

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- **Verification Checks:** Things like employment history or educational credentials tend to matter less for churches or religious organizations than they do for many other employers. However, churches can consider conducting these checks to make sure a job candidate has been honest. Reference checks also fall into this category and are especially crucial for churches. Speaking with former churches or parishes can help identify patterns of abuse in a priest's past if any exist.
- **Role-Specific Checks:** Role-specific checks include screenings for things such as motor vehicle reports and credit reports. These checks are not necessary for every employee in an organization, churches included: every church pastor probably doesn't need to pass a motor vehicle check. However, any positions that involve driving should include a motor vehicle check. Any volunteers or employees taking on financial responsibilities should face credit history checks. Any safety-sensitive positions should involve a drug test. Any jobs that demand formal qualifications should include professional license verifications during the background check.
- **Ongoing Criminal Monitoring:** Church employees and volunteers often remain in their positions for many years. A single background check at the time of hiring is not enough to ensure these individuals are safe and trustworthy. Things can happen after a person is hired that call into question whether they pose a risk to a church or its congregation. Ongoing criminal monitoring can limit these risks by notifying religious organizations of newer convictions.

Conclusion

Are you in charge of developing a new screening policy for your church or religious organization? Smart background checks can shield your organization from safety risks, negligence, scandals, bad publicity, and other dangers. Work with backgroundchecks.com to [customize a background check strategy for your church](#).

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