

What's On Your Mind?

Why do elders need to obtain a police records check?

"I've been a member of this congregation for 35 years. I've taught Sunday school, sung in choirs and visited in more homes than I can remember. Why do I need a police records check*? Everyone knows who I am and what I'm like. All of a sudden I'm being treated like a criminal."

Quite a few elders have thought or said something like this. I understand the sentiment expressed and how some elders might feel that obtaining a police records check is a nuisance or even an insult. There are, however, some good reasons why the church makes this requirement.

1. Making our churches safe places

The General Assembly, in 2005, approved *Leading with Care: A Policy for Ensuring a Climate of Safety for Children, Youth and Vulnerable Adults in The Presbyterian Church in Canada*. As the title suggests, the chief purpose of this policy is to help our churches be safe places for everyone, especially the more vulnerable in our midst.

Churches are made safer when we take steps to reduce the risk of people being hurt. For example, the policy indicates that the door to a Sunday school room must be left open or have a window in it so those in the room can be seen by those passing by. Another measure that makes our churches safer is to ask those who engage in high-risk situations to obtain a police records check. One of the hopes is that the check serves as a deterrent. Anyone with a record of assaulting young people, for example, would be deterred from offering to lead your youth group. Page 21 of the policy provides a guide to measure risk factors in your congregation. By honestly completing this guide, you will know who needs to obtain the check.

2. Elders and high-risk situations

Elders often find themselves in one-on-one situations. You might be visiting a person at home or in a hospital room. Being alone with someone in a private, unsupervised place is considered by the policy to be a high-risk situation. Therefore, elders, or anyone else in high-risk situations, need to have a police records check.

3. Being examples to the flock

Since others in the congregation may be required to obtain a police records check, the elders ought to lead by example and obtain them first.

4. Fulfilling vows

At their ordination, elders vow to submit themselves to all legal oversight of the courts of the church. Therefore, elders are to comply with this General Assembly policy.

5. Non-church groups require them

In most instances, you can't coach a baseball team or lead a Girl Guide group without first obtaining a police records check. If those outside the church care enough about the vulnerable to protect them in this way, how much more should the church do so?

May God bless you as you work to ensure your congregation is a safe and welcoming community of faith.

Blessings,
Don Muir
Associate Secretary
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* "Police Records Check" is a general term. In your municipality, another term may be used such as "Volunteer Screening Check."

What's on your mind?

Do you have a question about the polity of our church? Are you confused by something that happened at session, presbytery, synod, or General Assembly? Puzzling over a section of the *Book of Forms*?

Send your questions to The Rev. Don Muir and he will strive to answer them in future issues of *Equipping for . . . Elders* in a manner that maintains confidentiality and seeks to be helpful to the church at large.

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