

## **Making Our Church Safe from Child Sexual Abuse**

A public disruption during a worship service in 2009 created fear for some who were present and led us as a congregation to consider how to maintain safety in our church building. We realized that while public disruptions capture our attention, as a congregation we may be more vulnerable to other, less visible, risks to the safety of our children and more vulnerable members. The layout of our building with multiple entrances, levels, and wings makes it difficult to control who enters and has access to various areas of the church. We are also sadly aware that sexual misconduct occurs in churches and that most victims of sexual abuse know (and believe they can trust) their abuser.

We have designed the following precautionary guidelines in a spirit of care for the most vulnerable among us. We recognize that the care of children and youth rests not just with parents but the entire church community and we encourage everyone to be diligent about the care of our children.

The principles that guide FMC's commitment to Making our Church Safe from Child Sexual Abuse are taken from *Reducing the Risk II: Making Your Church Safe from Child Sexual Abuse*.

Principle 1: Risk increases as isolation increases.

Principle 2: Risk increases as accountability decreases.

Principle 3: Risk increases when there is an imbalance of power, authority, influence, and control between a potential abuser and a potential victim

Principle 4: As risk increases, supervision should increase.

FMC guidelines for Making our Church Safe from Child Sexual Abuse strive to decrease risk whenever possible. We do this through three primary commitments:

- 1) Background screening of all individuals working with children and youth as Sunday school teachers and youth leaders and mentors.
- 2) Conducting annual pre-service training with persons involved in children's and youth ministries.
- 3) Reporting all incidents and/or suspected incidents to proper authorities (civic and church).

### **General guidelines regarding our physical space:**

- All children up to age 10 should be in the sanctuary (or nursery) during worship and in class rooms during the education hour, unless the family chooses a responsible, known adult to be with them. These young persons should be accompanied by a responsible adult if they go the basement restrooms during worship.
- The 28<sup>th</sup> Avenue door will be locked at the beginning of children's time, decreasing the number of available entrances. A sign will be placed on the door saying: "During worship, enter by the front door."
- Children should not leave the building alone, and children and youth should not leave the building with an adult other than their parents (i.e. teacher, youth leader, etc.) without prior notice to and verbal agreement from parents.
- Anyone who sees a child leaving the building alone or finds a child alone without a parent should assist the child in finding his/her parent.
- Children should not be in the kitchen without an adult supervisor present. Cutting knives should be

stored in one of the elevated cupboards, out of reach of children.

- Parents of nursery-aged children are instructed to take their children to the bathroom at the beginning of nursery care and between worship and education hour. A portable potty chair will be kept in the back of the nursery for emergency needs so that nursery volunteers do not need to take children to the bathroom. If it is necessary for a child to leave the nursery, the paid staff person will take the child, leaving two adult (or an adult and youth) volunteers with the remaining children.

### **Guidelines for volunteer workers with children and youth**

- A criminal background check (screening) will be completed for all new paid workers and those who volunteer to work with children/youth programs and ministries (Sunday school teachers, youth leaders, and mentors). Screenings must be renewed every five years. The pastor who oversees Christian education and youth programs will maintain the completed forms in a confidential place.
- Only persons who have been attending FMC for more than six months and are affirmed by the pastoral staff will be permitted to be screened and participate in a volunteer capacity with the sole supervision of children or youth through high school. Individuals not known longer than six months may work with youth and children provided another known volunteer or employee is present. This does not apply to parent volunteers at FMC.
- Sunday school classes for children and youth may be conducted by one adult as long as the classroom

door is left open or the door has an unobstructed window.

- Supervision of children in the nursery should be provided by two adults (or one adult and one youth) working under the supervision of the paid nursery staff person. Nursery volunteers are exempt from the background screening process since they work under the supervision of a paid staff member who is screened. On Sundays when the nursery staff member is not present, the volunteer coordinator should attempt to schedule a substitute from the members of congregation who have undergone screening.
- Supervision of children and youth in any church activity should be provided by two adults, preferably unrelated. This “rule of two” should be maintained before and after activities and programs, until all children and youth are in custody of their parent or legal guardian. When there are overnights for junior and senior high youth (on or off church property), an adult of each gender represented is to be present, with a minimum of two adults present if the event is for one gender only.
- A signed release form will be required at the beginning of the school year providing permission for transport during group activities. Children and youth shall be picked up from church by parents or legal guardian. One sponsor shall not drive one child or youth home. Exception to this rule will be made only upon receiving the express verbal consent of a parent or legal guardian upon each occasion. See Appendix A: Parental Permission, Medical Release, and Transportation Form.

- A parent or legal guardian must give consent before their child(ren) goes anywhere alone with an approved volunteer child/youth worker, such as a youth mentor. The church will have on file a signed parental/guardian release form for each Mentor/Mentee pair giving consent for one-on-one activities. The mentor will make the parent or guardian aware of each one-on-one meeting. See Appendix B: Parent Affirmation Form
- Any inappropriate conduct or relationship between an adult volunteer or staff member and a child or youth will be confronted immediately and reported to a church staff person. As required, the inappropriate conduct will be further investigated and reported to the proper community authorities.

### **Guidelines for Training and Education**

The congregation will be educated about the child and youth sexual abuse prevention policies through distribution of printed material and a handout summarizing the guidelines that will be made available in the church office as well as other locations throughout the church. The summary handout will be included in the Visitor Information packet.

- When an individual completes the screening process to volunteer to work with children or youth, they will receive Safe Church training consisting of:
  - The nature of physical or verbal sexual abuse of children
  - The FMC Guidelines for Making our Church Safe from Child Sexual Abuse
  - Recognition of signs and symptoms of abuse

- Proper Response to a child's disclosure of abuse
- Reporting procedures for child sexual abuse
- All volunteers will repeat this Safe Church training at least every three years, generally in September.

### **Guidelines for Appropriate Touch**

- All of us need love. At times, this can be appropriately expressed through physical touch, such as hugging, a pat on the back, an arm around the shoulder, holding an infant or toddler, etc. If an adult working with children shows physical affection, it must occur with another adult present and should never be forced. If a child or another adult pulls away, even with others present, the person's wishes will be respected at all times.
- At no time should a child, even if fully clothed, be touched on or near the breasts, genitals or buttocks.

### **Guidelines for Responding to and Reporting Child Sexual Abuse and Sexual Harassment Allegations**

Child sexual abuse occurs when individuals expose children physically, verbally, visually, or psychologically to sexual activity that is inappropriate for their age, their psychological development, or their role in the family/church. An abuser may be an adult but can also be an adolescent.

Types of abuse that involve touching include:

- Fondling (or making the child touch someone else's genitals)
- Oral, genital and anal penetration
- Intercourse

- Forcible Rape

*Note: While tickling is not included in this list, it can often leave a child feeling vulnerable and is strongly discouraged. Flirting and kissing are never appropriate between staff or volunteers and the children or youth they are relating to.*

Types of abuse that do not involve touching include:

- Verbal comments
- Pornographic videos or pictures
- Obscene phone calls
- Exhibitionism or having a child pose, undress, or perform in a sexual nature
- Allowing children to witness sexual activity

Sexual harassment consists of inappropriate verbal or physical conduct of a sexual nature that has the purpose or effect of unreasonably interfering with an individual's sense of well-being by creating an intimidating, hostile, or offensive environment from the viewpoint of the affected individual. It is commonly defined as follows.

Unwelcome sexual advances and requests for sexual favors constitute sexual harassment when:

- 1) Submission to such conduct is made either explicitly or implicitly a term or condition of an individual's employment,
- 2) Submission to or rejection of such conduct by an individual is used as the basis for employment decisions affecting such individual or
- 3) Such conduct has the purpose or effect of unreasonably interfering with an individual's work performance or creating an intimidating, hostile or offensive working environment.

Although in legal terms, “sexual harassment” deals with the workplace, the sexual harassment of anyone—including all adults and children—will not be accepted in this church.

**Responding to a (potential) victim:**

- 1) If you come upon an incident, make your presence known and become an advocate for the child or youth being victimized.
- 2) Once the victim is safe, determine whether it is safe and best to engage the person of alleged misbehavior for an explanation of his/her action or if it is best to let others do the confronting.
- 3) Make notes immediately of what you witnessed. Note date, time, the names of the persons involved (or a description of height, hair, clothes if the offender is unknown) and the action or behaviors witnessed.
- 4) Report the incident immediately to a pastoral staff person for further investigation. Pastors are to report incidents to the Hennepin County Family Services. The number for reporting child abuse is: 612-348-3552. If the incident involves a pastor the incident should be reported to HCFS and additionally reported to the Conference Minister for Ministerial Leadership of Central Plains Mennonite Conference.
- 5) If you do not witness abuse but have cause to believe that it is taking place, report it to the pastor. Take complaint or disclosure seriously. Pastors are to report incidents to the Hennepin County Family Services. The number for reporting child abuse is: 612-348-3552. If the incident involves a pastor it should also be reported to the Conference Minister for Ministerial Leadership of Central Plains Mennonite Conference.

- 6) In order to protect the safety of the child/youth while an allegation is being investigated, restrictions will be put on the alleged perpetrator. FMC deacons, pastors and/or the church moderator will work in consultation with legal counsel to determine appropriate restrictions for the alleged perpetrator. Minimally, the alleged perpetrator will be prohibited from any contact with the victim and other children or youth. FMC may modify these restrictions based on the outcome of the investigation.

*Drafted by: Michael Bischoff, Kristin Green, Tom Johnson, Joan Kreider, Neil Okerlund, Michael Okerstrom, Joetta Schlabach, Teresa Wasick, Joan Wing. Approved by Council November 9, 2009.*

*Addendum: In summer 2016 Rhonda Martin and Joetta Schlabach drafted an amplification of the guidelines to protect children and youth from sexual abuse, including guidelines for reporting abuse or suspected abuse and/or sexual harassment. They drew from Safe Church policies from First Mennonite Church, Iowa City, and Portland (OR) Mennonite Church. Approved by Council, January 11, 2017.*