



Protection and Inclusion: Guide for Congregations on Safely Including Persons Who Have Committed Sexual Offenses

God calls us to be followers of Jesus Christ and, by the power of the Holy Spirit, to grow as communities of grace, joy and peace, so that God's healing and hope flow through us to the world.

Vision: Healing and Hope, Mennonite Church USA

You must be as cautious as snakes and as gentle as doves (Matthew 10:16 TEV).

Purpose

Churches that seek to minister in the name of Christ are called to be inclusive of those who may be stigmatized or rejected by society while providing for the protection of children and other vulnerable groups, and caring for those who may be survivors of crimes or traumatic experiences.

This document offers guidance for churches seeking to include persons who have committed sexual offenses while maintaining the congregation as a safe and healing community. Elements of it may also be useful for congregations ministering to persons who have committed other crimes or present other special needs.

General Background

Open Communities

Let anyone who is thirsty come to me (John 7:37).

Jesus boldly invited all to come to himself. The missional church will faithfully echo that invitation (Revelation 22:17) through a commitment to establish and maintain inviting communities.

Missional congregations will, necessarily, encounter individuals with deep needs and special challenges including individuals who have committed sexual offenses. Although unsettling, these situations invite us to remember how Christ responded when the outcasts of his day came to him:

Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. Go and learn what this means, "I desire mercy, not sacrifice." For I have come to call not the righteous but sinners (Matthew 9:12-13).

So, the missional church will resist any impulse to close itself to people with special needs and maintain the sort of open communities that Christ modeled.

It is through such inviting and open congregations that "God's healing and hope can flow through us to the world" (Vision: Healing and Hope, Mennonite Church USA).

Protective Communities

They will not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain (Isaiah 11:9).

God's will is that no child or vulnerable person be harmed. The church, especially, should be a safe community in which all are protected.

Congregations that are committed to safety and protection must work intentionally toward realizing those goals. Although it may be uncomfortable to do so, becoming informed about persons who commit sexual offenses and how children can be protected is essential for a congregation that seeks to "practice love, forgiveness, and hospitality that affirm our diversity and heal our brokenness" (Vision: Healing and Hope, Mennonite Church USA).

So the missional church must not ignore the harmful potential of sexual abuse or neglect to implement safeguards necessary to form the sort of safe communities that God desires.

It is through such safe and protective congregations that "God's healing and hope can flow through us to the world."

Open and Protective Communities

Being either an open congregation, or a protective congregation, is not so difficult. Many congregations are inclined to be open and inviting. If, however, they give inadequate attention to concerns of safety and protection, they will miss the goal imagined by the prophet Isaiah:

The wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid, the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them (Isaiah 11:6).

Society sees openness and protection as competing values. As followers of Jesus Christ, the church is called to hold openness and protection in dynamic and creative tension that may lead us to more fully embody Christ's grace, joy, and peace.

Develop a Protective Environment

Missional churches will find it easier to deal with challenges in a matter-of-fact way if they educate themselves in advance and develop plans for safety and protection before a specific situation arises.

Dove's Nest recommends that each congregation take the following steps:

1. Learn about child abuse and neglect in general, and sexual abuse in particular. *Let the Children Come: Preparing Faith Communities to End Child Abuse and Neglect* by Dr. Jeanette Harder (Herald Press) is an excellent book that will be helpful for congregations, Sunday school classes, small groups, leadership teams, and individuals.
2. Develop a comprehensive child and youth protection policy and assign specific people to be responsible for its implementation and maintenance. Dove's Nest (www.DovesNest.net) offers resources and sample policies.
3. Use a Christian safe environment curriculum, such as *Circle of Grace*, to educate children and youth about positive relationships with God and others and to help them identify and maintain appropriate boundaries. The *Circle of Grace* curriculum is currently available free to churches and schools affiliated with Mennonite Church USA and at modest cost to others. Visit the Dove's Nest website (www.DovesNest.net) for more information.
4. Respond to survivors. Given the prevalence of sexual abuse, congregations should assume there are survivors in their midst and be prepared to hear their concerns and minister appropriately.

Robust protection policies and ongoing education and awareness will be invaluable to a congregation when a person who is known to have committed a sexual offense comes into the congregation. These best practices enable a congregation to maintain positive boundaries and work, in a positive way, with persons who are known to have committed offenses. More importantly, they protect children and vulnerable individuals from those whose offenses have not yet come to light.

Become Aware

Needs of those who have experienced sexual abuse

Experiences of sexual abuse have serious, long-term consequences, including overwhelming feelings of fear, guilt, and anger. Many survivors also experience depression, anxiety, and physical difficulties such as sleeplessness, eating disorders, and fatigue. Some experience post-traumatic stress disorder or recurring memories such as flashbacks, nightmares, or intrusive thoughts. Many have difficulty developing positive relationships with others such as friends, spouses, and family members. Some turn to drugs or alcohol to lessen the pain, or may show suicidal or self-destructive tendencies.

If the abuse happened in the context of the church, there are also significant spiritual effects. Survivors may find it hard to trust church leaders and may even feel betrayed by God and the church. They may also feel sinful and question God's love for them.

Congregations can express hope and invite healing in many ways. For example:

1. Reach out to survivors, listen to their stories and validate their experiences.
2. Make sure worship services are sensitive to their needs. Do not emphasize suffering or push forgiveness too soon. Highlight God's desire for healing, wholeness, and life.
3. Allow them to grieve what has been taken from them, and help them in seeking repentance and justice from the offender.
4. Provide access to professional resources, as appropriate.
5. Remember that survivors do not all respond the same way and may be at different places on their healing journeys.

Needs of those who have committed sexual offenses

Persons who have been convicted of sexual offenses are often stereotyped, stigmatized, and discriminated against by social and corporate policies. Unfortunately these practices may actually increase the likelihood of reoffending. Congregations can express hope and invite healing in many ways. For example:

1. Go beyond the stereotypes. Obtain accurate information. For example:
 - a. Persons who have committed sexual offenses are not all alike. Some have committed heinous crimes while some young adults are placed on an offender registry for being intimate with a girl or boyfriend who is only a few years younger.
 - b. Despite stereotypes, the recidivism rate is lower than commonly believed. It varies depending upon type of offense.
 - c. Appropriate treatment does reduce recidivism.
2. Learn how your community deals with sexual offenses and the people who commit them. Invite treatment program staff members, parole or probation officers, and others involved with those who have committed sexual offenses to talk about their work and programs. Learn from survivors about the impact of sexual offenses on their lives and relationships. If possible and appropriate, arrange a visit with one or more individuals who have committed sexual offenses and are seeking to avoid reoffending.

3. Learn about, Circles of Support and Accountability (COSA), a restorative-justice based program that assists people to re-enter society after a period of incarceration for a sexual offense. The program was originally established by Mennonites in Canada and is now being used in many countries. Its two-fold motto is, “No more victims. No one is disposable.” Consider volunteering as a member of a COSA circle or donating for the support of the program.

In Specific Situations

Open and Protective Relationships

Congregations that seek to be inviting and open while protecting children and vulnerable people may become aware of people who have committed sexual offenses (or whose behavior raises concerns) in several ways:

1. A person who is known to have committed a sexual offense inquires about participation in the congregation.
2. A past sexual offense of a person in the congregation is disclosed or comes to light.
3. A person who is already active in the congregation commits an offense. (Note that such offenses or suspected offenses must be immediately reported to the police or child protective services.)
4. A person in the congregation behaves in ways that raise concern.

Regardless of how the congregation encounters such a person, it must carefully consider how it can minister to the individual while protecting children and vulnerable individuals.

Get Information

Direct and open communication with the individual who has committed an offense or whose behavior raises concerns (and with his or her parents, in the case of a minor) is the best first step. The suggestions offered in *Agreeing and Disagreeing in Love* (Mennonite Church USA) offer helpful guidance for the conduct of such conversations.

Each situation is different, but some basic things to discuss are:

1. Nature and details of offense(s)
2. Behaviors that raise concerns
3. Court or other orders pertaining to contacts
4. Treatment history
5. How the offense is regarded by the individual
6. Steps being taken to avoid reoffending
7. Ways the congregation can be supportive
8. Ways the congregation may help the individual avoid offending

With the individual’s cooperation and consent, similar information and recommendations should be sought from probation, parole, mental health, or other involved professionals and authorities.

Congregational leaders will also want to assess the individual’s:

1. Level of honesty in reporting offenses – what the individual shares, omits, or minimizes
2. Motivation for being part of the congregation – why involvement is desired, what level of involvement is desired

3. Willingness to recognize the needs of sexual abuse survivors and to respect and accept their needs for safety and healing
4. Willingness to comply with guidelines as a sign of his/her level of healing and willingness to take responsibility for his/her actions

If the individual is not open to communication, congregational leaders will need to proceed with information that is available to them.

Care for Survivors

If survivors of offenses committed by the individual (or their close family members) are present within the congregation, special care must be taken to assess the impact of the presence of the person who committed the offense in the congregation and to avoid additional traumatic impact upon them. In such cases, it may be necessary to exclude the individual from the congregation to allow the survivor and his or her family to recover from the abuse they experienced. The advice of survivor's advocates and other professionals experienced in working with survivors of sexual abuse should be sought when dealing with such situations.

Given the prevalence of sexual abuse, congregations should assume that there are other survivors present.

1. The congregation should be ready to care for them, listen to their concerns, and tend to their needs.
2. The congregation needs to sensitively and confidentially allow voices of survivors to be heard.
3. Services of professional counselors and facilitators should be engaged, as needed.

Develop a Written Plan

The person who has committed a sexual offense may be motivated to avoid reoffending. He or she may welcome compassionate help and accountability. In such cases, the individual (and his or her parent, if a minor) may be involved in developing a positive written plan to guide their involvement in the congregation.

In cases in which an individual is uncooperative, defensive, or hostile, a plan will need to be developed unilaterally, using the best information and advice available.

Regardless of whether the plan is developed with the individual's participation or independently by the leaders of the congregation, the following topics should be considered for inclusion:

1. Supervision – Should the individual be required to be accompanied by designated persons while in church facilities or attending church activities?
2. Limitations – Will the individual be excluded from specific responsibilities, activities, or areas of the church building?
3. Notification – Will notification of the individual's participation be made? If so, to whom (i.e. parents, teachers, youth sponsors, new participants, survivors, etc.)?
4. Support – How will the congregation be supportive of the individual as he or she seeks to be restored to the community and participate in the congregation in a positive way? (See COSA resource below.)
5. Noncompliance – How will the congregation respond if the individual violates the terms of the agreement? What changes might be imposed (i.e. warnings, additional restrictions, exclusion from the congregation, etc.)?

6. Implementation – Who will monitor adherence to the plan? How will they relate to the individual? How often will reviews be conducted? How will changes be made, if they are required?
7. Acceptance – The plan should be signed by the individual (and parents, if a minor) and congregational leaders. Any involved supervising or treatment professionals (probation, parole, mental health, treatment staff, etc.) should also receive copies of the plan.

Final Cautions

Protection is the first priority. Keeping children and other vulnerable people from harm is essential. If guidelines are violated or policies are ignored, measures must be taken to insure their safety. In such cases, it may be necessary to bar the individual from participation.

Reporting child abuse is required. Regardless of congregational process or policy, reporting of any suspected child abuse, including sexual abuse, emotional abuse, neglect, or physical abuse, *must* be reported to the police or child protective services at once. This is the law, and it is the best way to protect children in our congregations and communities.

Know your limitations. The congregation may be a supportive and caring community, but it is not able to replace professional counseling or treatment. Each congregation differs in their ability to include individuals who have committed sexual offenses. Not every congregation will be able to include every individual.

Practice child protection. Guidelines for those who are known to have committed sexual offenses should never take the place of robust child protection policies and ongoing education and awareness. These maintain positive protective boundaries for all.

Resources

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