

First Netherlands Reformed Congregation

ABUSE POLICY

March, 2017

INTRODUCTION

This document establishes the policies of the First Netherlands Reformed Congregation (the “church”) that seek to prevent all forms of abusive behaviors from occurring to children who are under the instruction or supervisions of Church Personnel (defined in the next section) during church sponsored events. It is our prayer and hope that the Lord will assist us in this regard and protect us from the sin of abusive behavior.

In addition to defining policies to protect children, this document also establishes reporting requirements that are to be followed if anyone has a reasonable suspicion that abuse has occurred. In general, anyone who suspects abuse is responsible for reporting it to the authorities. Abuse, if proven, constitutes criminal behavior. The church has no role in defining criminal behavior regarding child abuse, nor in making a determination whether a crime occurred. This responsibility rests with the Child Protective Services (CPS), police, prosecutor’s office, and the criminal justice system. For this reason, the policy mandates that allegations of abuse be directed to the governmental authorities.

On the other hand, if allegations of ungodly behavior arise from actions in the church or related to church activities, then the consistory requests that it be notified in the manner summarized in the reporting section of this policy. It will then investigate and determine appropriate ecclesiastical actions.

GENERAL DEFINITIONS

Child (Children) A person under the age of 18.

Public Place Any place that is within the sight and sound of others.

Church Personnel Any of the following when functioning in their respective church roles:

1. The minister (is also a consistory member);
2. Consistory members;
3. Volunteers who provide any church related services. Examples include nursery workers, youth group leaders and catechism teachers (excluding consistory members), and children's choir director(s); and
4. Employees.

Abuse 'Abuse' is defined consistent with the Michigan Child Protection Law definition which is summarized in a more general way as follows:

1. **Physical abuse.** Non-accidental physical injury that is intentionally inflicted on a child.
2. **Threatened abuse.** Threatened physical harm that is communicated to a child.
3. **Sexual abuse.** Any contact or activity with a child that is of a sexual nature.

ABUSE POLICY

1. Each allegation of abuse reported to the consistory will be taken seriously.
2. Abuse against a child in the church building, in a church-sponsored program, or by Church Personnel will not be tolerated.
3. Persons with a previous history of criminal sexual misconduct or abuse will not be allowed to serve in any position that puts others at risk.
4. Allegations of abuse to a child by a church leader or volunteer that allegedly occurred on church property or during a church sponsored program are to be reported as set forth on page 9. The consistory will cooperate fully with civil authorities who are responsible for handling a reported abuse incident.
5. In any ecclesiastical investigation of abuse allegations by the church, the accused has the right to an impartial hearing and 'due process'.
6. A Church Personnel who is accused of abuse will be suspended from serving the church in any capacity until the allegations are resolved.
7. A Church Personnel who confesses or is found guilty of abuse will be removed or dismissed from his position or office.
8. Church Personnel who are removed or dismissed from their position or office as a consequence of abuse will not be considered for any position that puts others at risk.

ABUSE PREVENTION: SCREENING

Screening Church Personnel who will be assigned to interact with children is an important step in avoiding abuse and limiting the legal liability of the Consistory in the context of abuse allegations. Failure to screen a person on a sex offender list would present serious problems for the church and each consistory member. Accordingly, this section sets forth a screening program that is designed to provide assurance that any person with an abuse record will not be assigned to interact with the children or young people of the congregation. At the same time it takes into account the close relationship that our church families have with one another and the burden and mistrust that screening may introduce in our church. Accordingly, screening is suggested only if good grounds exist – for example the family is not one that is well known to our church community.

Procedures

1. Profile. Church Personnel who are assigned to interact with children should complete a Clearance Profile in the case of consistory members, but not in the case of volunteers unless extenuating circumstances suggest screening in the case of a particular volunteer is warranted.
2. Interview. Depending on the results of the profile, an interview may be required to determine whether it is appropriate for the person to perform the planned role.
3. References. In limited circumstances in which the prospective church worker is new or relatively unknown, reference checks may be requested.
4. The Abuse Committee which is appointed by the consistory will administer the screening process. All records will be stored for a minimum of six years. The committee will report any issues identified during the screening process to the consistory.

ABUSE PREVENTION: NURSERY GUIDELINES

General Guidelines

1. A Clearance Profile must be on file for each Church Personnel who performs nursery services and (i) who has not been a baptized or professing member for the past six months in our church, or a sister church in the denomination; or, (ii) in circumstances in which the person responsible for scheduling nursery assignments determines screening should be conducted. Additional screening may be required depending on the responses in a Profile.
2. Two Church Personnel will be assigned nursery duties and two must be present for each nursery. One adult will serve for every six children if there are more than twelve children needing care.
3. The Church Personnel who perform nursery duties on any given date and time may not be exclusively from the same family.
4. Each adult person who performs nursery services must be a confessing member of Beckwith.
5. Children age 12 and above may serve as nursery aids (and be counted as Church Personnel) under direct adult supervision.
6. Church Personnel are not allowed to take a child from the scheduled nursery area to another part of the church building except to a restroom as provided below.
7. Church Personnel are to arrive ten minutes before the ministry begins to provide supervision for the children. Parents are requested to remain with their children until an adult Church Personnel arrives.
8. If a child needs medical attention, the parent should be notified as soon as possible.
9. Church Personnel are required to review these policies at least annually.
10. Anyone refusing to follow the policies summarized above will be required to stop providing nursery services.

Arrival and Dismissal (ages 0-4)

1. A parent must register a child before leaving them in the nursery.
2. The adult Church Personnel will monitor to ensure children are reunited with their parent.
3. Parents are allowed in the nursery only for calming or assimilating a child to his new environment.

Restroom Assistance (ages 0-4)

1. Church Personnel will change diapers or clothes only in the sight of another Church Personnel.
2. Church Personnel will not change diapers or assist with toilet needs if a parent has requested to be contacted and wishes to assist their own child.
3. Children should use the closest restroom to the nursery. If occupied, the Church Personnel may escort the child to a different restroom.
4. For children who do not require assistance in the restroom, the Church Personnel must remain outside the restroom or stall door.

5. For children who require assistance, the Church Personnel must assist the child with the restroom stall door ajar or restroom door ajar (as appropriate).

Obtaining Parent

1. The parent should be notified as soon as possible when a child has been crying for 10 minutes, is ill or injured.
2. Church Personnel will go to the parent and return with them rather than bringing the child to them.

ABUSE PREVENTION: GUIDELINES FOR CHURCH PERSONNEL ASSIGNED TO CHILDREN (Excluding Nursery)

1. Church Personnel must complete a Clearance Profile before serving an assigned duty with children or youth. Based on the responses in a Profile, additional screening may be required.
2. Where practical, Church Personnel will serve in teams of at least two adults. Only one Church Personnel is assigned to teach catechism (Sunday school) classes.
3. Church Personnel must be professing members in good standing (not under discipline).
4. If a child needs medical attention, the parent should be notified as soon as possible.
5. Church Personnel should not remain alone with a child for an extended period of time during the performance of church duties, Church Personnel will, as reasonably required by the circumstances, make arrangements for another adult to supervise children if they would otherwise be alone for an extended period. To the extent possible, classroom door windows should allow for an unobstructed view of the room.
6. Church Personnel will be required to review the policies at least annually, and the fact that reviews have occurred will be noted in the consistory minutes.
7. Anyone refusing to follow these policies or anyone violating these policies will be required to relinquish their duties in the assigned task.

ABUSE PREVENTION: BEHAVIOR POLICY

General Guidelines

1. Appropriate behavioral guidelines are to be communicated by Church Personnel to children.
 - a. Children are to refrain from pushing, hitting, kicking or injuring anyone in the classroom.
 - b. Children are expected to be considerate of others when talking and use an appropriate voice level.
 - c. Children are expected to be obedient and follow the instructions of the Church Personnel.
2. Church Personnel are encouraged not to engage in physical contact other than a handshake, and then only in a public area. Displays of affection between participants will also be monitored if circumstances reasonably required such monitoring
3. Corporal punishment is not permitted nor may force be threatened.
4. Abusive verbal discipline (yelling, hurling insults, inappropriate threatening) is not permitted.
5. If misbehavior during a church sponsored activity continues, Church Personnel should request assistance from others, which may include a phone call to parents, the minister or consistory members.
6. The parent will be notified of the inappropriate behavior of their child.
7. Any suspected use of alcohol or drugs by participants in sponsored activities must be reported to the consistory.

One-to-One Guidelines

1. When a child meets with Church Personnel, this meeting will occur in a public place.
2. If a one-on-one meeting is necessary due for example to emergency circumstances, the Church Personnel should consider the wisdom of maintaining a record of any such meeting summarizing key facts- date, reason such a meeting was necessary, length of the meeting, and what transpired.

Overnight Outing Guidelines

1. An Agreement and Release form will be required from each participant.
2. Permission for transportation will be received from the parent.
3. When activities are held away from church, the on-site Church Personnel hold authority over the participants who are responsible for following their rules and guidelines.
4. Sleeping areas will be off limits to members of the opposite sex.
5. Male/female contact will not be allowed after the designated bedtime.

REPORTING ALLEGATIONS OF ABUSE

1. An individual who hears of or witnesses child abuse or has reasonable suspicion of child abuse is urged to report to police officials (616-456-3400) or Child Protective Services ("CPS") (616-248-9600). A minister, as a general rule, is required by law to orally report suspected abuse or neglect immediately and file a written report within 72 hours after making the oral report. An exception applies if the minister receives child abuse allegations from a person seeking guidance and advice who expects the conversation to be kept private.
2. The individual with first-hand information leading to a reasonable suspicion of child abuse is urged to report the suspicion of abuse. In most circumstances the identity of the person making a report will not be revealed without consent unless required for the purposes of a court hearing. The individual with first-hand information must fill out the appropriate report to police officials or to CPS.
3. In the event an individual is uncertain as to whether child abuse has occurred, the individual is encouraged to consult CPS or the president of the consistory to assist with such assessment.
 - a. This consultation should take place as soon as possible (authorities should be notified within 24 hours) after the individual hears information or witnesses behavior causing him/her to have a reasonable suspicion of child abuse.
 - b. The individual will not be prohibited from reporting what he/she may believe is a reasonable suspicion of child abuse.
4. In the case of a report to police officials or CPS regarding child abuse that relates to Beckwith Church Personnel, the reporter will notify a member of the consistory as soon as possible.
5. It is the responsibility of the police or CPS to notify the alleged offender of the allegations against him/her. Neither the first hand reporter nor the consistory should communicate with the alleged offender until police officials or CPS has interviewed him/her.
6. State law protects persons from liability when they report actual or suspected abuse, as long as they do not act maliciously.
7. Matthew 18 applies to cases of interpersonal offenses, but should not be interpreted to protect the accused from the reporting requirements mandated by the law which are summarized above. In suspected cases of abuse, truth is to be pursued in love. Love to the suspected abuser means reporting the incident to quickly put an end to any abusive behavior. Love to the victim should be expressed by acts of kindness, patience, and actions to protect them from any further abuse.

RESPONDING TO ALLEGATIONS

1. A small response team appointed by the consistory will oversee the process of responding to an abuse allegation. The team should consist of at least three persons and include at least one elder and one deacon.
2. The response team will determine the appropriate actions based on the known information and circumstances and taking into account the principles and policies outlined in this document.
3. If allegations are made against a consistory member the response team should consult with the moderator in developing a plan of action.
4. In the event that criminal proceedings are commenced, the response team should initially take such action as they deem appropriate and also revisit the matter at the conclusion of the proceeding.
5. The response team will minister with compassion to all individuals and families involved in an alleged abuse matter.