

# Safe Protection Policy Development Guide for Faith Communities

## Introduction

**The purpose of establishing a Safe Protection Policy is to assist your faith community to be proactive in setting guidelines for keeping children, youth and vulnerable adults safe from abuse in your faith community. It is a way of encouraging participants to be the best they can be in caring for all God’s children of any age. A violation against a child, youth, or vulnerable adult is a violation against God’s own creation.**

**The following is a suggested step-by-step guide to developing a Safe Protection Policy. It is important that you make the statement your own and reflect your state/regional church/province’s laws and requirements. Having such a policy in place besides being a proactive step to encourage healthy and safe relationships, and it will guide your faith community during a difficult time if and when you have an abuse report.**

**Step 1 - Appoint a safe protection policy committee.** The role of the committee is to guide the faith community in establishing a policy and then empowered by the faith community to follow through on the policy. (See item G below for a suggested list of their responsibilities which should be listed in your Safe Protection Policy.) Persons selected for this committee should be familiar with abuse issues and prevention, have a background check completed, know the difference between secrecy and confidentiality, and abide by state/province and local laws for reporting child abuse. The committee will also contact conference/regional church when receiving a complaint on a pastor (credentialed or not) or other church leader who will then follow the church wide policy to conduct a proper investigation. If the complaint involves child abuse, then the first step will be to follow the mandatory reporting guidelines and then report to the conference/regional church office.

**Step 2 Develop a Faith/Mission/Purpose statement.** It is important for a faith community to develop a statement that fits the faith community. A sample statement: *“We, (name of faith community) are committed to providing an environment that is safe and healthy for our members, attenders, children and youth to learn about and experience God’s love. We are also committed to being proactive in protecting persons of all ages within our community from abuse. This policy will be used to aid us in our commitments to prevention. When an abuse is reported, we are committed to address it in an open and transparent way that listens to the needs of the victim/survivors. This policy will be our guide for being proactive in preventing abuse and addressing abuse if and when it happens within our faith community.”* “See the end of this policy for the names of the committee and their responsibilities.”

Know the theology you are basing your statement on. Some helpful scriptures to keep in mind as you work on your policy and maybe even helpful to include in the policy are Matthew 25:31ff, Mark 10:14 and Luke 9:48. There are others.

It is necessary that this document be made easily accessible to members of the faith community. Some faith communities will post the policy page of their website. Some have included the mission statement from the policy on the home page with a link to where the whole policy can be found. Additionally, it could be displayed on bulletin boards or literature shelves or wherever you think might be most helpful for your faith community to have access to it.

### **Step 3 State/province Law**

Check to see what your state/province laws are regarding abuse and reporting, and include it in your policy. Be sure to understand your state/province's requirements are for mandatory reporting of abuse of a child, youth or vulnerable adult. Most states/provinces have a statement about legal immunity when reporting such as: *"a person who reports child abuse or neglect is immune from criminal or civil liability, unless the person acted maliciously or in bad faith."* Also the state/province may have a confidentiality statement that all reports of abuse to the appropriate authorities are confidential and will only be reported to child protection workers, police, prosecutors, doctors or other authorized personnel.

### **Step 4 This next section lists standard items to be included in your policy**

- A. Definition of Abuse.** (Be aware of your state/province definitions of abuse which you may want to list here) Abuse can be by an adult on a child, youth or vulnerable adult, and can include physical, sexual, emotional, spiritual and power abuse. Some tools used can be but not limited to manipulation, harassing, bullying, grooming, intimidating, isolating, Abuse by a child on a child does happen. Again know what the laws are about reporting that situation.
- B. Facility Safety** (review your building to address issues of safety. Some ideas but not limited to for this section)
- All classroom doors will have windows. If a classroom doesn't have a window, then the door will be kept open.
  - Tucked away classrooms will not be used for children's classrooms
  - Pastors' offices will also have windows in the door
  - There will be an open door policy for all classrooms
  - There will be guidelines for bathroom use
- C. Guidelines for Volunteers/teachers**
- New persons from another faith community, will have a waiting period of at least six months before being considered for teaching or leading within the faith

community. New persons new to the faith or no previous church background will have a waiting period of a year.

- When coming from another faith community, new persons will provide two references from their former church with one being from their pastor.
- A potential volunteer will be required to fill out a form expressing interest, have a background check completed and if requested, meet with the Safe Protection Policy Committee for an interview for clearance to work with the faith communities's children, youth and vulnerable adults.
- No known sex offender will be allowed to work with our children.
- Each volunteer/teacher will attend worship regularly.
- Background Checks will be required on all volunteers/teachers. Refusal to do so will be a reason to deny them the assignment. Any person who leaves the church for a period of time and then returns to the faith community will need to do a background check. In addition, pastors and other hired staff will also be asked to do a regular background check.
- Each year, persons will be asked to read the policy and sign an agreement to abide by the policy. Any person refusing to sign a commitment will not be able to teach or lead in the faith community. Any person breaking the commitment will be asked to step away from teaching.
- Will report to the safe protection policy committee, if one suspects or witnesses abuse, or if the child/youth reports to you abuse
- Once a year, participate in an educational training on abuse awareness and prevention.

#### **D. Safe use of Electronic Communication**

- Adults will limit one-on-one electronic communications with children. "Emails, messages, text or phone conversations should be short and should usually be a one-off communication to arrange a meeting or remind young people to attend an event."
- Parents or guardians will be copied on emails and kept apprised of ongoing texting or phone conversations.
- Communication will be traceable Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, e-mail, and texting are traceable. Snapchat and other such communications are not traceable, and thus are prohibited.
- Photos of children or youth will not be shared on personal social media platforms without permission from a parent/guardian. (Consider creating a photography waiver for parents/guardians of children and youth to sign.)
- Communication should not take place with young people between the hours of 8 pm and 7 am unless it is an emergency.
- When a volunteer leaves a ministry involving youth due to misconduct of any kind, staff should request that all youth contact information must be removed from that adult volunteers devices.
- Minors will never be referenced by name or labeled with other identifying

information on any social media or other website locations

**E. Process For Reporting Abuse or Handling a Complaint of Abuse.** (Some faith communities will add a general statement of how suspected/reported abuse will be handled: *“When we receive a report of abuse or a complaint of abuse, it will be taken seriously. The church will avoid inappropriate responses to allegations including denial, accusation and minimizing the events.”*)

- All suspected abuse of children, youth and vulnerable adults will be reported to the local authorities within 24 hours by the designated person from our faith community according to the laws of our state/province or region. (Will that be by your Safe Protection Policy Committee, or pastor? Good to name who will follow through.). We will cooperate with the authorities.
- An incident report will be filled out for our faith community’s records
- When a complaint is against our credentialed/non credentialed pastor/leader, we will follow the guidelines of MCUSA/MC of Canada and immediately report to (name your conference/national church who will then follow the Ministerial Misconduct Policy found here (Give a link).
- Any person accused of abuse will immediately be suspended from all responsibilities until an investigation is completed.
- If any member of the Safe Policies Committee, pastoral team or other leadership committee who is a relative, close friend, or has any other close relationship with the accused, complainant, they will be recused from any discussion about the situation and expected to support the leadership in following the process. If such person interferes in the policy, they will be suspended from their leadership role. (This is done to protect the integrity of the faith community’s agreed upon policy and for the health of the faith community. It also relieves the pressure that could be placed on the individual
- Only the following persons will be authorized to speak to the media on behalf of our faith community unless they are the one accused. (Name here who is designated such a pastor, chair of the leadership group, chair of the policy committee, etc.).
- If the abuse report doesn’t involve a child, youth or vulnerable adult or a pastor, then the Safe Protection Policy Committee or an assigned investigation team will conduct the investigation. (Your conference/regional church can be helpful at this time.)
- The conference/regional church will be informed that there is a reported/suspected abuse situation within the faith community. (When there is a report, it can be a very tense time for the leadership of the faith community and outside support can keep the leadership steady. Don’t go it alone.)
- The faith community’s insurance company will be informed.

- The faith community will be appropriately informed if there is an investigation and of the decisions made following the investigation.
- The safety of persons will override the offender's right for confidentiality.

**F. If a KnownSex Offender Wants To Attend The Faith Community.** Some add a section here if they have a policy in place to properly deal with the request. Accepting sex offenders is not for every faith community. This can be a major struggle for a faith community especially if there is not a policy in place that will help the faith community in making the best decision to keep children, youth and vulnerable adults safe and have integrity for healthy boundaries and accountability. Even with a policy in place, it is a challenge and can divide the faith community if there is not an understanding of common sex offenders' behaviors. Recidivism is high for an offender and to assume they have either "paid" their dues by prison time

**G. The Safe Protection Policy Committee will**

- Implement and facilitate this policy
- Follow up if and when there is a complaint
- Keep up on the latest laws of your region.
- Oversee the screening of potential volunteers especially if they are new to the group. (Have them fill out a screening form, do a background check and contact their references from their previous congregation or if an unchurched person, ask for other credible references.
- Review screening forms and background checks, making sure the background checks are updated every 3-5 years.
- Review and update this policy every 2-3 years and communicate to the faith community when this policy is updated.
- Oversee and schedule a yearly educational event for those who work with children.
- Plan ways to keep the faith community aware of the policy and find ways to keep the community aware of abuse, healthy boundaries, etc.
- Inform all new attendees of the policy.
- Be aware of the insurance requirements for the group.
- Make sure copies of the policy are readily available at various areas of the church at all times.

**H. Community Resources.** This will include numbers for police, Child Protection Services, counseling services and other appropriate resources within your community

**I. Appendix (Documents of items to include**

- Background Check Form
- Incident Record Form
- Commitment form
- Parent Permission Form

**J. See [Safe Protection Policy Guidelines](#) for sample policies that can inform a faith community for a healthy response.**