

Policy Regarding the Prevention of Sexual and Other Abuse

Portland Mennonite Church / Portland, Oregon

Rationale

Portland Mennonite Church (PMC) is committed to providing a safe environment for all who share in ministries and activities sponsored by the church, including all participants and members, their children, all who volunteer as church leaders, and all employed by the congregation including pastors, teachers, and staff.

Portland Mennonite Church has adopted a policy and procedural steps to discourage and prevent sexual and other abuse in our community. Regarding children, child abuse can be in the form of physical, emotional, or sexual abuse but also includes neglect. While the primary focus of this policy is sexual abuse, our congregation wants to be an advocate for children in any instance of abuse when the health and well-being of a child is at stake. This policy also addresses sexual harassment in our workplace which results from unwanted sexual conduct that creates a hostile or offensive working environment. Child abuse and sexual harassment in our community will not be accepted.

This policy seeks to create a culture where this can become a reality, a place which follows Christ's example of giving respect and honor to all persons. PMC believes every person of every age and gender is highly valued.

Congregational Commitment

As a congregation we commit to:

- 1) Background screening of all individuals working with children.**
- 2) Conducting annual pre-service training with persons involved in children's ministries.**
- 3) Reporting all incidents and/or suspected incidents to proper authorities (church/denominational leadership and civic authorities)**

Accountability & Responsibility

Portland Mennonite Church understands that a policy alone does not protect our children or our employees. Rather, it is the policy that helps us define and create a culture that keeps children safe and creates a healthy work environment. While our entire community is responsible for creating this culture, the ultimate responsibility for the implementation of this policy lies with the Leadership Table. The Leadership Table is responsible for approving the policy and for the oversight of the Pastoral staff and pertinent committees who implement the practices associated with this policy. Much of the implementation responsibility will reside with the Pastor of Children and Youth and the Elder for Children and Youth ministries. The Sunnyside Mennonite Montessori School (SMMS) Board of Directors will maintain responsibility for this policy within their school. The PMC Staff Relations Committee is responsible for reviewing this policy on a regular basis.

Definitions:

Child sexual abuse

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. An abuser may be an adult but can also be an adolescent or another child.

Types of abuse that involve touching include:

- Fondling
- Oral, genital and anal penetration
- Intercourse
- Forcible rape

Types of abuse that do not involve touching include:

- Verbal comments
- Pornographic videos or pictures
- Obscene phone calls
- Exhibitionism
- Allowing children to witness sexual activity

Sexual Harassment

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 a legal sense, the term "sexual harassment" deals with the workplace, the sexual harassment of anyone – including all adults and children – will not be accepted in this church.

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. (Parents with children receiving nursery care are provided with an opportunity to decline diaper or toileting assistance for their children).

Procedures:

- 1) A background check (screening) will be completed for all new paid workers, volunteers at SMMS, and attendees at PMC who wish to work with children/youth programs and ministries. Screenings are to be renewed every five years. A designee of the PMC Leadership Table shall be oriented to the policy and shall have access to screening results. Completed background check forms will be maintained in a confidential file by the Pastor of Children and Youth and are considered active for five years. This Pastor is also responsible for maintaining current screenings.
- 2) Only persons who have been attending PMC for more than six months and are affirmed by 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 our youth and children provided another known volunteer or employee is present. This does not apply to parent volunteers at SMMS.
- 3) All screenings are to be completed prior to a person's work with children or youth.
- 4) All new staff and volunteers will be given an orientation and training for their work with children and youth prior to beginning their work. This training will also be provided annually for returning staff and volunteers as a refresher conversation. Staff or volunteers who begin an assignment mid-year will also be trained on this policy. A PMC designee will provide the orientation for SMMS.

The orientation and training shall consist of information regarding:

- A) The nature of physical or verbal sexual abuse of children
 - B) The congregational policy on child sexual abuse
 - C) Possible symptoms which can alert one to abuse
 - D) Instructions for reporting suspected child sexual abuse
 - E) Completion of screening and background check forms
- 5) Individuals working in or volunteering for higher risk positions (overnights, camps, retreats, etc.) involving children or youth through high school will also be trained on this policy and must have completed the above screening process. When there are overnights for Jr. High and High School, 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.
 - 6) PMC will follow the "Two Adult Rule", meaning we require two adults to be present, preferably not related, during all children and youth activities. If there is a legitimate need for an adult to be alone with a child or youth, the staff or volunteer worker shall obtain the consent of the child's or youth's parent or guardian before proceeding to be alone with the child or youth.
 - 7) Volunteers with criminal child abuse violations, whether charges pending, convicted, or pled guilty to abuse shall not work with children or youth through high school in the church or school.
 - 8) Pastoral staff is required to place the orientation to this policy on the agenda of the Children's Christian Education committee and the orientation of youth group leaders annually for review

and implementation. Likewise, the SMMS Board of Directors is required to place this on their agenda annually.

- 9) Windows should exist in all doors of rooms in which activities involving youth or children are taking place. Bathroom doors should be propped open during SMMS school hours.
- 10) The nursery committee is responsible for utilizing the registration/check in process to obtain a parent's consent for diapering or toileting assistance for their child.
- 11) 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.

Steps to take if you suspect child or youth sexual abuse in our congregation

- 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 of day, the names of the persons involved (or a description of height, hair, clothes if the person is unknown) and the action or behaviors witnessed.
- 4) Report the incident immediately to your supervisor or a pastoral staff person for further investigation. Supervisors/Pastors are to report incidents to the Oregon Department of Human Services. **The number for reporting child abuse is 1-855-503-SAFE (7233).** If the incident involves a pastor it should also be reported to the Executive Conference Minister of Pacific Northwest Mennonite Conference.
- 5) If you do not witness abuse but have cause to believe that it is taking place, report it to your supervisor. Supervisors/Pastors are to report incidents to the Oregon Department of Human Services. **The number for reporting child abuse is 1-855-503-SAFE (7233).** If the incident involves a pastor it should also be reported to the Executive Conference Minister of Pacific Northwest Mennonite Conference.

Policy history:

Adopted by PMC Elders Council June 27, 2007

Reviewed and Amended by Elders Council September 2012

Reviewed and amended by The PMC Leadership Table February 17, 2016

“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.”

Protection and Inclusion Addendum:

A GUIDE FOR PORTLAND MENNONITE CHURCH ON SAFELY INCLUDING PERSONS WHO HAVE COMMITTED SEXUAL OFFENSES

Purpose

Portland Mennonite Church (PMC) seeks to minister in the name of Christ which means we 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 including persons who have committed sexual offenses while maintaining the congregation as a safe and healing community.

Developing a Protective Environment

Basic Policy

1. Any individual who is known to have been convicted of a child sexual offense must develop a written plan to guide their involvement in the congregation (see details on page 4)
2. Any individual who is known to have been convicted of a child sexual offense must not be allowed any unsupervised contact with children and may not be involved in children’s or youth ministry (formal or informal).
3. All parents of children and youth must be notified if there is a registered sex offender attending church at the time this information becomes known. New families to the church must be notified of this information within two months of beginning to attend church.

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.

PMC 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.

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.

PMC 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.

Guide for Specific Situations

PMC 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 sexual offense, asks 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.

PRESENTING STEP: 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) Discover 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.

FIRST PLANNED STEP: Care for Survivors first

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.

SECOND PLANNED STEP: Develop a Written Plan for the offender

It is our hope that a person who has committed a sexual offense and wishes to be part of PMC will be motivated to avoid reoffending. Our policy is to offer a path toward this reality through clear accountability. *In cases in which an individual has a desire to be part of the PMC community but is uncooperative, defensive, or hostile, a plan will 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? *[Any individual who is known to have been convicted of a child sexual offense must not be allowed any unsupervised contact with children and may not be involved in children's or youth ministry (formal or informal).]*
- 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.)? *[All parents of children and youth must be notified if there is a registered sex offender attending church at the time this information becomes known. New families to the church must be notified of this information within two months of beginning to attend church.]*
- 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?
- 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.

Cultural touchstones of PMC when making decisions regarding sexual abuse.

- 1) **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.
- 2) **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.

Acknowledgment of limitations.

- 1) PMC is not able to replace professional counseling or treatment. Each congregation differs in their ability to include individuals who have committed sexual offenses. PMC may not be able to include every individual.
- 2) Our **primary role** as a congregation is to practice adherence to our child protection policy.

Adopted by Portland Mennonite Church Leadership Table - April, 2016