

# **Safe Ministry with Children and Youth Policy**

*Rochester Mennonite Fellowship*

## **Rationale for the policy**

In order to provide a safe and secure environment for the children and youth of our congregation, Rochester Mennonite Fellowship created the following policy and procedural steps to discourage and prevent child abuse. Child abuse can be in the form of physical, psychological (including emotional and mental), sexual or ritual abuse and 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.

While this policy directly protects children, it is also set up to protect parents, Sunday school teachers, visitors, leaders of the church, and the church as an entity. To that end, this policy does the following:

- Explains how to understand and identify abuse.
- Identifies the members of and responsibilities of the Safe Ministry Committee.
- Describes a system of screening and training for all those working with children.
- Outlines expectations for teachers and mentors.
- Explains the plan of action should an allegation of abuse arise.

These guidelines and procedures empower adults in the congregation by providing knowledge about child abuse, a place to turn if an incident arises, and accountability for their actions. Having a clearly articulated plan in place for addressing suspicions of abuse reduces fear and confusion and provides necessary guidance for the members of the Safe Ministry Committee.

This policy is a part of our congregation's broader desire to promote and encourage healthy sexuality in all our members. Churches have unique features that make them susceptible to incidents of child molestation (trust, opportunity, access, and need). In light of that, we have created this policy as a safeguard for all people who worship with us.

## **A Persons disqualified from working with children and youth**

Members with criminal child abuse or violent crime arrests, indictments, or prosecutions will not be allowed to work with children or youth at Rochester Mennonite Fellowship. Members unwilling to sign, agree to and abide by this policy will not be allowed to work with our children and youth.

## **B Safe Ministry Committee**

A Safe Ministry Committee will provide oversight to this policy, the teacher screening process, and any allegations that are made. The committee will be comprised of the members of the current Leadership Team plus the Sunday School Coordinator(s). The committee from September 2024 to August 2025 is Carol Knieriem, Teresa Nickeson, Eloise Schrag, Ana Perez, Susan Bernhart and Anna Wray.

### **Yearly responsibilities of this committee:**

- 1 Review the Safe Ministry policy. Propose any changes for congregational approval.
- 2 Put the names of the current committee into the policy and then distribute it to the congregation.

- 3 Choose 1–2 members of the leadership team to work with the Sunday School Coordinator for teacher screening.
- 4 Follow the guidelines and plan described in this policy to address any issues that arise.
- 5 Prayerfully discern appropriate levels of confidentiality.

## **C Screening Process**

All individuals who wish to work with children or youth in our congregation are required to take part in a screening process prior to working as a teacher, assistant, or mentor. All Sunday school teachers should have been regular attendees at Rochester Mennonite Fellowship's Sunday morning worship for at least 6 months prior to teaching a class. All Youth Mentors should have been regular attendees at Rochester Mennonite Fellowship's Sunday morning worship for at least 1 year prior to becoming a mentor. All teachers, assistants and mentors will need to complete annual training (as outlined below) and agree to abide by the guidelines of this policy.

### **Screening for Teachers and Mentors will include the following steps:**

*All forms and information shall remain confidential.*

1. Completion of an Application Form.
2. Completion of Reference Contact Form.
3. Criminal background and sex offender check.\*
4. An interview with the Sunday School Coordinator(s) and a member of the Safe Ministry Committee, with the intent to have two committee members present for the interview. This interview will include the following questions: "Have you ever been accused of, charged with, or convicted of any illegal offense pertaining to the welfare of a child?" and, "Have you ever been in a situation in which your conduct or the conduct of others was a concern with regard to the safety of children or youth?"

\*In requiring this authorization, Rochester Mennonite Fellowship recognizes that background checks are a common practice in today's institutional and commercial life. At the same time, the church acknowledges: first, the inherent intrusiveness of these investigations, and second, that public authorities charged with the proper management of personal information are themselves flawed, and thus can, and indeed have been known to, discharge their responsibilities in such a way as to create unintended consequences. In view of this, candidates for any position of ministry to children and youth shall have the opportunity to examine their own records first, if they wish. Any decision by a candidate to withdraw an application will be received without prejudice.

If something arises in the background check or interview that is of significant concern, the entire Safe Ministry Committee will come together to discern how to proceed. Screening for Classroom Assistants and Nursery Workers will include the following steps: All forms and information shall remain confidential.

1. Completion of an application form.
2. Criminal background and sex offender check.
3. An interview with the Sunday School Coordinator only if there is a question about the application or background check.

## **D Guidelines for Sunday School Teachers, Mentors, and Facilities**

1. All teachers and mentors are required to participate in yearly safe ministry training. This workshop will include several components:
  - a. Reviewing the vision and goals for our Sunday school program.
  - b. Exploring the safe ministry curriculum for the year, scheduling teachers and events, and sharing ideas.
  - c. Reviewing, agreeing to, and signing the congregational Safe Ministry for Children and Youth Policy.
  - d. Teachers will be encouraged to get CPR and first aid training if at all possible. If cost is prohibitive for an individual, he or she can contact the Safe Ministry Committee for financial assistance.
2. Because classroom assistants and nursery workers function in a childcare/helping role (versus a formal teaching role), they can opt to attend the yearly workshop *or* complete the training requirement by reviewing the church's Safe Ministry for Children and Youth policy with the Sunday School Coordinator(s).
3. Best practice is to have 2 non-related adults, if possible, with every class/group of children/youth; however, because we often only have one teacher for each class, the Sunday School Coordinator will designate a roamer to monitor the classrooms periodically during the Sunday school hour. We will also make use of a roamer if there is a worker who is less than 18 years of age.
4. For non-Sunday school events that are sponsored by the church (e.g., an overnight trip, VBS, etc), we will have at least two adults and will attempt to have two adults of each represented gender as supervisors. Our goal is adequate supervision, so the Committee will review the supervision needs for individual events as necessary.
5. At the beginning of each mentor year, parents will be asked to sign a permission form so that their child can meet with the chosen mentor. Mentors are then responsible to let parents know in advance where and when they will be meeting with the youth. While group activities are preferred, when mentors want to meet alone with youth they are expected to meet in public places (coffee shops, at the church, bookstore, etc.).
6. All classroom doors must have windows in them. These windows should not be covered while a class is in session.
7. If there are people under the age of 18 who wish to work with children, the Safe Ministry Committee will decide on a case-by-case basis if this is safe and appropriate.
8. Physical discipline and emotionally abusive discipline are prohibited.
9. All displays of verbal and physical affection shall be nonsexual in nature and intent and have the prior consent of the recipient.

## **E Response Plan for Suspected Abuse**

1. If a child discloses abuse or child abuse is suspected, the person who the child disclosed to or who has the suspicions will immediately make a report to the New York State Child Abuse Hotline at 1-800-342-3720 or local law enforcement. If the situation meets legal standards required for Child Protective Services to take action, the report will be assigned to the Monroe County CPS unit for investigation. See attached "Incident Report Form" which should be completed and includes the information that will be requested when the hotline is contacted.

2. When the alleged offender is part of the Rochester Mennonite Fellowship church community, the Incident Report Form should also be given to a member of the Safe Ministry Committee. (See section B for names of committee members.)  
The Safe Ministry Committee will take these additional steps:
  - a. The committee will meet within 24 hours to assess the situation and talk to the person who made the report. If a member of the committee is an accused person, he or she shall remove themselves from the proceedings of the incident.
  - b. The committee will notify the child's parents/guardian.
  - c. The committee will notify the accused party of the report and immediately relieve the alleged offender from all responsibilities involving contact with children until the conclusion of the investigation.
  - d. Within 48 hours, the committee will notify all parents whose children may have encountered the alleged offender, and let them know that allegations have been made and reported.
  - e. At their discretion the committee may inform the New York Mennonite Conference district minister and conference minister so they can be an additional resource for the committee.
  - f. The committee will assign a church representative as a spokesperson to the media. Only this person will be authorized to speak on behalf of the congregation.
  - g. If appropriate, the committee will notify the insurance carrier.
  - h. The committee will complete the Incident Response Form.
  - i. The Committee shall be available to minister to the needs of both the victim and the accused, with different members of the committee responding to each party, prioritizing the needs of the victim.

## **F Confidentiality**

A locked file cabinet containing all forms, screening reports, interviews, consent forms, training records, written reports and other documentation related to this policy will be maintained in a location known to the Safe Ministry Policy committee.

Any records related to reports of incidents or complaints will be kept in a separate file folder in the back of the file cabinet.

When materials are accessed, the record of entry must be noted in a log with the name of the file accessed, date of access, name of person accessing, and reason for access.

**I have read and reviewed the Safe Ministry with Children and Youth Policy and I agree to observe and abide by the policy.**

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Print name

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Signature

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Date

Please read the following pages regarding Understanding and Identifying Abuse.

## Understanding and Identifying Abuse

### What is Child Abuse/Neglect?

The Family Court Act of the state of New York defines child neglect or abuse as the act, or failure to act, by any parent or caretaker that results in the death, serious physical or emotional harm, sexual abuse, or exploitation of a child under the age of 18.

#### **Child abuse**

- Physical abuse occurs when a parent or caretaker inflicts or allows someone to inflict serious physical injury other than by accidental means.
- This includes, but is not limited to, shaking, beating, biting, kicking, punching, and burning. It is also considered abuse if a parent creates a condition or allows the condition to be created, that leads to a child becoming the victim of serious physical injury.
- Child sexual abuse includes incest, rape, obscene sexual performance, fondling a child's genitals, intercourse, sodomy, and any other contact such as exposing a child to sexual activity, or commercial sexual exploitation such as prostitution of a minor or production of pornographic materials involving a minor.

#### **Child Neglect**

Neglect is defined as the failure of a parent or caretaker to provide needed food, clothing, shelter, medical care, or supervision to the degree that the child's health, safety, and well-being are threatened with harm. Examples include, but are not limited to:

- Failure to provide adequate food, clothing, or shelter.
- Failure to provide medical or mental health care
- Leaving a child alone who is not developmentally able to be left alone without supervision.
- Subjecting a child to humiliation, fear, verbal terror or extreme criticism. ● Using corporal punishment beyond what is objectively reasonable and it results in the physical or emotional harm of a child.
- Keeping, manufacturing, or selling drugs in the presence of a child, or giving drugs to a child.

"Studies have estimated that 1 out of 3 girls is sexually abused before the age of 18. Similarly, studies indicate 1 out of 7 boys have been sexually abused before the age of 18." These numbers may well be underestimated since many children are reluctant to report. *Safe Sanctuaries, Reducing the Risk of Child Abuse in the Church*, by Joy T. Melton.

Child sexual abuse may be violent or non-violent. All child sexual abuse is an exploitation of a child's vulnerability and powerlessness in which the abuser is fully responsible for the actions. Child sexual abuse is criminal behavior that involves children in sexual behaviors for which they are not personally, socially, and developmentally ready.

Child sexual abuse occurs in all demographic, racial, ethnic, socio-economic, and religious groups. Strangers account for less than 20 percent of the abusers. Estimates indicate that when a known assailant commits the abuse, half of the time it is a father or stepfather, and the rest of the time it is a trusted adult who misuses his or her authority over children.

## The Profile of a Child Molester

- Over eighty percent of the time, the abuser is someone known to the victim
- Most abuse takes place within the context of an ongoing relationship
- The usual offender is between the ages of 20–30 years
- 20 percent of sex offenders begin their activity before the age of 18
- Child abusers often are married and have children

The most likely assailants in a church setting include Sunday School teachers, religious educators, mentors, nursery or preschool workers, teachers in a church-operated school, camp counselors, “concerned” adults who volunteer to transport children to church, and clergy. Trusted adults, male or female, can easily mislead children and most incidents of child sexual abuse take place in the context of an ongoing relationship between the abuser and the child and the child’s family.

## Symptoms of Molestation—What to watch for:

### Physical signs:

- Lacerations and bruises
- Difficulty with urination
- Discomfort when sitting
- Torn or bloody underclothing

### Behavioral signs:

- Anxiety when approaching church or nursery
- Nervous or hostile behavior toward adults
- “Acting out” or play of sexual behavior with other children
- Withdrawal from church activities and friends

### Verbal signs:

- “(A particular person) does things to me when we are alone.”
- “I don’t like to be alone with (a particular person).”