

Safe Sanctuary
for
Children and Youth

First Mennonite Church

Bluffton, Ohio

Approved: August 26, 2007

Revised: October 2010

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Safe Sanctuary for Children and Youth

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PURPOSE AND SCOPE

First Mennonite Church- Bluffton, Ohio
“Safe Sanctuary for Children and Youth”

Vision: Healing and Hope

God calls us to be followers of Jesus Christ and, by the power of the Holy Spirit, to grow as a community of grace, joy and peace, so that God’s healing and hope flow through us to the world. (Vision Statement for First Mennonite Church)

Living out our belief and calling of creating a community of healing and hope through our church community and into our world is presented with unique challenges of responding to the prevalence of physical, emotional and sexual abuse in our society. Nationally, 1 out of every 4 females will or has experienced some form of sexual abuse in their lifetime as well as 1 out of every 6 males. The most vulnerable population to this type of abuse is children and youth.

In response to the reality of this devastating social issue First Mennonite Church seeks to create a faithful response through the implementation of *Safe Sanctuary for Children and Youth*. Our faith tradition is a source of strength and healing in difficult times. We profess that each person in the midst of our church community should have the assurance that our church is a safe place, without fear or threat of violence. We are committed to providing a safe, secure and healthy environment for all children and youth who enter our doors.

Abuse of a child or youth brings suffering, erodes self-esteem, destroys relationships, splits families, and violates human integrity. Any type of abuse is an abuse of power and a betrayal of trust. First Mennonite Church will not allow, condone, or tolerate the abuse of any child or youth. Recognizing that there is potential for abuse to occur in any congregation, FMC is taking preventive steps in developing *Safe Sanctuary for Children and Youth* policy.

As part of this process congregational members will become informed about child abuse/neglect and the need for creating a safe environment for all children and youth.

All children and youth workers including FMC staff and volunteers:

- will receive training and resources related to the issues in this policy.
- will be asked to complete a “Letter of Conduct History and Intent” and a “Memo of Understanding and Intent” to qualify for working with children and youth. All new staff persons as well as anyone who works with children and youth as a volunteer will have a background check.

We will continue to seek the Spirit as we strive to create and sustain a community of safety for all at FMC.

DEFINITIONS UTILIZED

First Mennonite Church – Bluffton, Ohio
“Safe Sanctuary for Children and Youth”

General Definitions

ACCSB: Allen County Children’s Service Board 419 227-8590

Adult: Any person eighteen (18) years of age or older

Background Check: A procedure used by the State of Ohio to perform a Criminal Information Request (with fingerprints) or any other procedure used to check a person’s background for criminal activity.

Child: A person under the age of twelve (12)

Deacons: Members of the Deacon Commission at First Mennonite Church

FMC: First Mennonite Church

Minor: A person under the age of eighteen (18) or a mentally retarded, developmentally disabled, or physically impaired child under twenty-one (21) years of age

Nursery Children: Children from birth through three (3) years of age

Pastoral Team: The pastors at FMC.

Preschoolers: Children from age 3-5 years

Staff: Pastors, music director, administrative assistant, custodian, and any other employees of FMC

Volunteer: Persons providing services at FMC, on behalf of FMC, but are not employed by FMC for those services

Worker: Any employee or volunteer assigned tasks related to children and youth of all ages at FMC

Youth: A person from the age of twelve (12) years to the age of eighteen (18)

Definitions of Abuse

- Abuse: Any willful behavior that endangers one's development, security, or health. Abuse may be perpetrated on a child or youth by an adult or another child or another youth.
- Bullying/intimidation: Behavior, often between children and/or youth, that results in a person feeling threatened, fearful or coerced.
- Emotional Abuse: Verbal or unspoken messages (such as gestures) or written language insinuating another person is worthless, bad, unloved or undeserving of love or care. This may include disparaging and derogatory terms.
- Neglect: Abuse in which a person endangers a person's health, safety or welfare through negligence. Neglect may include withholding food, clothing, medical care, education, and even affection and affirmation of the person's self-worth.
- Physical Abuse: Any non-accidental physical injury causing substantial risk or impairment of physical well being inflicted or allowed to be inflicted upon a person by another person.
- Sexual Abuse: A specific abuse in which a person of less power is tricked, coerced, bribed or in any way involved in sexual contact. The power imbalance between the perpetrator and victim may result from the perpetrator's greater age, size, role, experience or authority. Examples of sexual abuse may include groping, fondling, intercourse, incest, the exploitation of prostitution, and the exposure and inappropriate use of internet access to view pornographic sites.

GUIDELINES FOR STAFF AND VOLUNTEERS

First Mennonite Church – Bluffton, Ohio
“*Safe Sanctuary for Children and Youth*”

To provide a safe and nurturing environment for the children and youth who participate in the programs of First Mennonite Church the following guidelines have been established for those who desire a position involving the supervision or custody of minors. The pastoral team and Christian Education director will be responsible for implementing and monitoring the *Safe Sanctuary for Children and Youth* policy with all church employees and/or volunteers.

1. All individuals who seek to volunteer with the children and/or youth and all employed church staff will: a) sign a Letter of Conduct History and Intent b) sign a Memo of Understanding and Intent c) have a background check conducted by the church.
2. Volunteers under the age of 18 will work under adult supervision.
3. Volunteers will have attended FMC regularly for at least six months prior to volunteering for activities involving the supervision of groups of children (Sunday School teachers, nursery workers, substitute teacher) or activities involving regular off grounds supervision of groups of youth (youth sponsors) or individuals (youth mentors).
4. Any person convicted of sexual abuse will not be approved as a child/youth worker.
5. If contract child care providers are utilized they will be subject to a background check.
6. When a guest speaker or guest youth worker participates with the youth group an adult will be present who has completed the training with Safe Sanctuary and is familiar with policies.

GENERAL GUIDELINES

First Mennonite Church - Bluffton, Ohio
"Safe Sanctuary for Children and Youth"

Activities and programs involving children and youth include Christian Education, Nursery, Senior High Youth Fellowship, Mentoring, Junior High Youth Fellowship, Venture Club and general activities.

- 1) Two adults should be present whenever possible during church activities involving children and youth. Activities shall occur in rooms which have windows for monitoring. In the event that is not possible the door should remain open. An adult that has not taken training for Safe Sanctuary shall be accompanied by at least one other adult during the activity.
- 2) At the conclusion of an activity children under the age of six should be released only to their parent or guardian, to an adult designated by the parent or guardian, or to an older sibling designated by the parent or guardian.
- 3) Supervision during unstructured events and during transition times is the responsibility of the individual child's parents or guardians, with the understanding that FMC functions as a community to ensure the safety of children and youth.
- 4) In regard to discipline and expressions of affection, volunteers and staff are expected to treat all minors in an appropriate fashion, including:
 - a) Respecting physical boundaries. A full body hug, kiss on the mouth or any touch of private areas (those areas covered by a bathing suit) are considered clearly inappropriate. Appropriate physical affection (e.g. a quick hug, hand squeeze, etc.) can be offered but never forced.
 - b) Nurturing discipline. Physical discipline is not permitted under any circumstances. Verbal discipline may be administered respectfully and compassionately. The child's parent or guardian(s) should be involved if additional intervention is needed.
- 5) Training:
 - a) Pastors, church staff, Sunday School teachers and youth group leaders along with all other persons who will be registering to volunteer will be asked to attend an annual training program in which they are educated regarding the church's policies for the prevention of abuse, procedures to be used in all ministries with children and youth, appropriate steps to report suspected child abuse and dynamics of abuse.

This will include worship service and Sunday School volunteers working in the nursery as well as children's choir leaders.

b) Congregational Educational Opportunities

Family educational opportunities shall be provided in order to learn about the facts of abuse and abuse prevention. A main goal for this training will be to assist parent or guardians and children in the discussion of abuse, and ways of increasing children's safety. Opportunities will also be provided for Junior and Senior High youth. Other interested congregational members will be welcome at educational settings that are appropriate.

- 6) Outside Programs. First Mennonite Church will require each of the outside programs that use the church facility to agree to take responsibility for the care and welfare of their children and youth as well as sign the *Request for Use of Facility and Building* form which includes release of liability.
- 7) The Deacon's Committee on Safety will be composed of several Deacons as well as person(s) from FMC who are familiar with issues and policies related to child welfare. The Deacons Commission will form this committee each year when they reorganize.
- 8) Copies of the Safe Sanctuary policy will be placed in visible places in each children/youth classroom with appropriate forms for reporting abuse and procedures to follow.

IDENTIFYING AND REPORTING ABUSE

First Mennonite Church – Bluffton, Ohio

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The church’s responsibility is to be aware and report suspected abuse and/or neglect. The state of Ohio has mandated reporting of abuse or possible risk of abuse (Ohio Revised Code 2151.42.1) which states that: along with other professions such as health care providers and school workers; *“a person rendering spiritual treatment through prayer in accordance with the tenets of well-recognized religion”* must immediately report the knowledge or suspicion of abuse to the appropriate authorities.

Although a volunteer/staff person may not be a mandated reporter, we believe that anyone involved with children and youth who suspects abuse has a moral obligation to report it. When signs or symptoms of abuse arise, or a staff person witnesses abuse or a child makes a disclosure, the volunteer/staff person should immediately notify a member of the pastoral team who will subsequently notify the Deacon’s Committee on Safety. It is important to remember that reporting suspected abuse reflects caring and is not an act of disloyalty.

A sound reporting procedure promotes safety among our children and youth and accountability among church workers. Church workers will be trained in identifying inappropriate behavior with children, and to identify the symptoms of abuse or neglect. Reporting guidelines are designed to guide this difficult process and ensure the safety and confidentiality of all involved parties.

There may be occasions where incidents occur that include bullying or intimidation but do not mandate reporting. Such bullying and intimidation represents a form of violence toward others and First Mennonite Church does not condone such behaviors in its congregational life. If those behaviors are reported, the pastoral team along with church leadership as necessary, will gather information and devise a response plan such that youth and children remain safe within our community.

GUIDELINES FOR REPORTING ABUSE AND RESPONSE PLAN

First Mennonite Church – Bluffton, Ohio

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- 1) Any incident or reasonable suspicion of abuse shall be reported, in writing, using the Abuse Incident Report Form, or orally to a member of the pastoral team. An advocate from the Deacon’s committee on safety will be available to assist the reporter in processing the incident.
- 2) A member of the pastoral team shall notify the parent or guardians of the victim and help insure the immediate safety of the victim.
- 3) The accused abuser shall be treated with dignity, but will be immediately removed from further church involvement with children or youth.
- 4) The reporter, in cooperation with the pastoral team, will notify the Allen County Sheriff’s Dept. (419 227-3535) and/or Allen County Children Services Board (419 227-8590) as stated in Ohio laws.
- 5) A written record shall be kept in a secured place concerning the steps taken in response to the allegations. The lead pastor will confidentially maintain all information.
- 6) The church will seek guidance from the Central District Conference staff and obtain legal counsel as deemed necessary.
- 7) Regardless of the action taken by ACCSB, the Deacon’s Committee on Safety may work with the alleged victim, the accused, and their families in order to seek resolution and healing. All parties involved will be treated with dignity, compassion and respect.
- 8) A brief and honest statement will be prepared at the discretion of the Deacon’s Committee on Safety that can be made to the congregation without giving unnecessary details, placing blame, interfering with the victim’s privacy or violating any confidentiality concerns.

ABUSE INCIDENT REPORT FORM
First Mennonite Church – Bluffton, Ohio
“Safe Sanctuary for Children and Youth”

Person reporting the incident _____

Date _____

Location where incident occurred _____

Describe the details of the incident including the names of the victims
and alleged abuser(s):

Please give this completed form to one of the pastoral team at FMC.

ABUSE SYMPTOM(S) REPORT FORM
First Mennonite Church – Bluffton, Ohio
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Person reporting: _____

Date: _____

Name of alleged victim: _____

Describe the symptoms that were observed and the circumstances that led to this observation:

Please give this completed form to one of the pastoral team at FMC.