

Protecting and Nurturing our Children and Youth

Resolution for Mennonite Church USA - 2013 Convention

Preamble: To raise awareness of child abuse and neglect and to encourage the adoption of policies and practices to protect children and youth in the church and community, we offer this resolution.

I. Purpose and Reason

a. Affirmation of God's call to protect children and youth from harm.

According to our Anabaptist understanding of Biblical faith, and our denominational vision statement, we strive to follow Jesus in word and deed. We know that Christ welcomed children and blessed and healed them.¹ We also know that Jesus declared stern consequences for harming those who are vulnerable.² God calls us to protect our children and youth and to nurture them so they will know they are deeply loved by God and invited to also follow Christ with joy and faithfulness.

As we seek to "...grow as communities of grace, joy and peace, so that God's healing and hope flow through us to the world," we desire to act with love and integrity in all our relationships and avoid the exploitation of vulnerable people or the misuse of positions or power within the church or family.

b. Scope of the problem

Tragically, child abuse and neglect remains a persistent problem in our homes and communities. The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services reports³ that in the United States during 2011:

- 3,400,000 reports of child abuse and neglect were made and involved an estimated 6.2 million children.
- Child abuse occurred at every socioeconomic level, across ethnic and cultural lines, within all religions, and at all levels of education.
- Victimization was split between the genders, with boys accounting for 49% and girls accounting for 51% of victims.

According to the Child Abuse and Prevention Treatment Act, child abuse and neglect is: "Any recent act or failure to act on the part of a parent or caretaker which results in death, serious physical or emotional harm, sexual abuse or exploitation; or an act or failure to act which presents an imminent risk of serious harm."³

¹ Matthew 18:1-5, Mark 10:13-16, Luke 18:15-17, Mark 5:35-43, 7:24-30, 9:14-27.

² Matthew 18:6-7, 10.

³ U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Administration on Children, Youth and Families, Children's Bureau. (2012). *Child Maltreatment 2011*. Available from <http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/cb/research-data-technology/statistics-research/child-maltreatment>.

The three most common forms of abuse are³:

- Neglect – 79%
- Physical Abuse – 18%
- Sexual Abuse – 9%

Sadly, these realities are also present within the church and in Christian families. In fact, congregations, schools, and camps can be especially vulnerable because they are naturally trusting and open. According to the *2006 Church Member Profile*, nearly 20% of Mennonite Church USA women and 6% of men reported that they had been sexually abused or violated as a child or teen⁴.

As a denomination, we want to be aware of and watchful for signs of possible abuse or neglect in order that children and youth can be protected from physical, emotional, or sexual threats. When cases of abuse or neglect come to light, we want to be prepared to take proper action to address the matter.

c. Resolution of protection

We, therefore, resolve that the Mennonite Church USA will work proactively with its member congregations, conferences and affiliated organizations to promote the protection of children and youth from all forms of abuse and neglect and to advocate for their safety.

Specific steps toward this end may include, but are not limited to, the following suggested actions:

- Talk often about God’s love and care for children. Be clear that the church also cares for children and does not support any abuse or violence.
- Learn more about this problem and possible solutions.
- Recommend that each congregation, conference, school, and church related programs involving children and youth develop and implement a child-protection policy. This policy should include the process for reporting of suspected abuse or neglect to authorities.
- Prepare children for positive relationships by using a faith-based curriculum like *Circle of Grace*, which teaches children and youth how to identify and maintain appropriate physical, emotional, spiritual, and sexual boundaries; recognize when boundary violations are about to occur; and how to take action when boundaries are threatened or violated.
- Recommend that each congregation, conference, school, and church related program involving children and youth provide parenting classes, support groups, and friendship for involved parents.
- Be familiar with resources in the larger community and partner with them. Invite child protection agencies to provide training and information.

⁴ <http://www.dovesnest.net/CAN>

- Advocate for policies that protect and nurture children and families with local, state, and national leaders.
- Observe April as Child Abuse Prevention month on a regular basis.

II. Information for follow-up to the resolution

This resolution was submitted by First Mennonite Church, Lincoln, Nebraska.

As congregations prepare to implement the guidelines in this resolution, they may find it helpful to seek the resources of other congregations or entities that have specific experience in implementing such guidelines. Many local communities have specific resources for congregations.

The Mennonite Church USA website recently highlighted one such resource at <http://www.mennoniteusa.org/2013/04/11/doves-nest-resources-to-prevent-abuse/>. That resource, Dove's Nest, is closely related to First Mennonite Church of Lincoln, Nebraska, who submitted this proposal. Their resources are available to congregations across Mennonite Church USA.

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All agencies, area conferences, and congregations of Mennonite Church USA are highly encouraged to have sexual misconduct coverage as part of their liability insurance coverage. It is also recommended that Mennonite Church USA (and the area conference of the insured congregation) be named as an additional insured on the liability insurance coverage. Conferences should keep up to date records of coverage for its congregations. Agencies should forward confirmation of coverage directly to Mennonite Church USA Executive Board.