



Protection and Inclusion: Guide for Faith Communities on Safely Including Persons Who Have Committed Sexual Offenses

*Welcome one another, therefore, just as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God
(Romans 15:7).*

You must be as cautious as snakes and as gentle as doves (Matthew 10:16 GNT).

Purpose

Faith communities that seek to minister in the name of Christ are called to include those who may be stigmatized or rejected by society but also to *prioritize* the protection of children and other vulnerable individuals and care for those who are victims and survivors of abuse, crimes, or other traumatic experiences.

This document offers guidance for churches seeking to incorporate persons who have committed sexual offenses, while maintaining the congregation as a safe and healing community. Elements of it may also be useful for congregations ministering to persons who have committed other crimes or exhibited questionable behaviors or poor boundaries.

General Background

Open Communities

Let anyone who is thirsty come to me (John 7:37).

Jesus boldly invited all to come to him. The mission-minded church will faithfully echo that invitation (Revelation 22:17) through a commitment to establish and maintain inviting communities.

These congregations will, necessarily, encounter individuals who have committed sexual offenses. Although unsettling, these situations invite us to remember how Christ responded when the outcasts of his day came to him:

Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. Go and learn what this means, "I desire mercy, not sacrifice." For I have come to call not the righteous but sinners (Matthew 9:12–13).

A church following this call will maintain the sort of open communities that Christ modeled.

Protective Communities

They will not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain (Isaiah 11:9).

God's will is that no child or vulnerable person be harmed. The church should be a safe community in which all are protected.

Congregations that are committed to safety and protection must work intentionally toward realizing those goals. Although it may be uncomfortable to do so, it is essential for a congregation to be informed and to practice love and heal brokenness.

The missional church must not ignore, overlook, or underestimate the harm and criminality of abuse and must implement the safeguards necessary to form the sort of safe communities that God desires.

Open and Protective Communities

Many congregations are inclined to be hospitable and inviting to everyone in their community. If, however, they give inadequate attention to concerns of safety and protection, they will miss the goal imagined by the prophet Isaiah:

The wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid, the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them (Isaiah 11:6).

Develop a Protective Environment

Individuals and leaders in the church should be trained and develop plans for safety and protection before a specific situation arises by taking the following steps:

1. Learn about child abuse and neglect in general, and sexual abuse in particular. *Let the Children Come: Preparing Faith Communities to End Child Abuse and Neglect* by Dr. Jeanette Harder (Herald Press) and *The Child Safeguarding Policy Guide for Churches and Ministries* by Basyle Tchividjian and Shira M. Berkovits (New Growth Press) are excellent books that will be helpful for congregations, Sunday school classes, small groups, leadership teams, and individuals.
2. Develop a comprehensive child and youth protection policy and assign specific people to be responsible for its implementation and maintenance. Dove's Nest (<https://dovesnest.net/policies>) offers resources and model and example policies.
3. Use a Christian safe environment curriculum, such as *Circle of Grace*, to educate children and youth about positive relationships with God and others and to help them identify and maintain appropriate boundaries. The *Circle of Grace* curriculum is currently available free to Mennonite entities and at modest cost to others. Visit Dove's Nest website (<https://dovesnest.net/circleofgrace>) for more information.
4. Given the prevalence of sexual abuse, congregations should assume there are victims and survivors in their midst and be prepared to hear their concerns and minister appropriately. Validate those who speak out against abuse. Remember: one in four women and one in six men were sexually abused as children, and these survivors are in our churches. (<https://dovesnest.net/CAN>)

Become Aware

Needs of those who have experienced sexual abuse

Survivors of sexual abuse have experienced horrific actions that have long-lasting and complicated consequences. Nevertheless, survivors are also strong, courageous individuals and can go on to live good and productive lives, despite the crimes committed against them. However, the long-term consequences and impact of sexual abuse may include feelings of fear, guilt, and anger. Depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder, difficulty in relationships, and self-destructive tendencies can sometimes be results of child abuse.

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 feel betrayed by God and the church. They may also feel sinful and question God's love for them.

Congregations 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 push forgiveness too soon or suggest that victims should accept their suffering. Instead, highlight God's desire for healing, wholeness, and life. Worship resources are available on Dove's Nest's website: <http://DovesNest.net/resources>.
3. Allow survivors to grieve what has been taken from them, and help them in seeking repentance and justice from their offenders, if they wish.
4. Provide access to professional resources, as appropriate.
5. Remember that survivors do not all respond the same way and may be at different places on their healing journeys.
6. Invite sexual trauma experts as speakers to educate the community about abuse.

Needs of those who have committed sexual offenses

Persons who have committed sexual violence against other individuals have long-term and difficult-to-resolve psychological issues. Many in our society choose to stigmatize and stereotype these individuals. However, congregations can extend hope and healing by offering offenders the grace, mercy, and accountability of Jesus. Congregations can reduce the likelihood of individuals reoffending and express hope and invite healing and accountability in many ways.

1. Obtain accurate information rather than relying on stereotypes. Persons who have committed sexual offenses are not all alike. Some are adults; some are minors. Some have committed heinous crimes, while some young adults are placed on an offender registry for being intimate with a girlfriend or boyfriend who was only a few years younger.
2. Learn how professionals deal with sexual offenses and the people who commit them. Although the research is not unequivocal, cognitive behavioral treatment has been found to decrease sex offense recidivism. Invite treatment program staff members or parole or probation officers to talk about their work and programs. Consider arranging a visit with an individual who has committed sexual offenses and is seeking to avoid reoffending.

3. Learn about [Circles of Support and Accountability](#) (COSA), a restorative-justice based program that assists people to reenter 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.”
4. Some offenders may be better served through adult-only programming like coffee meetings, Bible studies, or Sunday school classes. Churches can demonstrate God’s love in place of or beyond Sunday morning worship services.

In Specific Situations: **Working with an Individual Who Has Committed a Sexual Offense**

First and foremost, report all instances or suspicions of abuse to local authorities and cooperate with investigations.

See more: <https://dovesnest.net/Reporting-Abuse-and-Keeping-the-Victim-at-the-Center>

Open and Protective Relationships

Congregations that seek to be inviting and open while protecting children and vulnerable people may become aware of people who have committed sexual offenses (or whose behavior raises concerns) in several ways, such as:

1. A person who is known to have committed a sexual offense inquires 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.

Get Information

Following these steps, direct 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).

Each situation is different, but collect the following information. Reports and recommendations should be sought from the court and arrest records, probation, parole, mental health, or other involved professionals and authorities. Some of these documents are public record; others will need the cooperation and consent of the individual. Do not rely solely on the individual to provide this information.

1. Nature of the offense(s) and characteristics of victims
2. Court or other legal orders currently in place
3. Treatment history and completion
4. Steps already being taken by the individual to avoid reoffending
5. Ways the congregation can be supportive and help the individual be accountable and avoid reoffending.

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 their level of healing and willingness to take responsibility for their actions.
5. Participation in professional counseling, therapy, and other outside resources, if appropriate.
6. Perception of the offense, willingness to take responsibility for their actions, and level of empathy for their victims.

The congregation should not rely solely on the offender's word. If the individual is not open to communication, congregational leaders will need to proceed with the information that is available to them and assume a high level of risk. A written safety plan, also called a covenant or limited access agreement, is successful only if the offender complies and is open to being held accountable (Oudshoorn, 2015).

Care for Survivors

If survivors of offenses committed by the individual (or their close family members) are present within the congregation, special care must be taken. It is rarely advisable for the offender to stay in the same church as the victims; in most cases, it will be necessary to exclude the offending individual from the congregation to allow the survivor and his or her family to recover. 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 the presence of abuse survivors.

1. The congregation should be ready to care for survivors, 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. The services of professional counselors and facilitators should be engaged, as needed.

Develop a Written Plan

The person who has committed a sexual offense may be motivated to avoid reoffending. He or she may welcome compassionate help and accountability. In such cases, the individual (and his or her parents, if a minor) may be involved in developing a written plan to guide their involvement in the congregation.

In cases in which an individual is uncooperative, defensive, or hostile, a plan will need to be developed unilaterally, using the best information and counsel available. If the offender will not sign or agree to follow the written plan, leadership will exclude the offender from church or certain church activities.

The following topics should be included in any written plan:

1. Supervision. Should the individual be required to be accompanied by designated persons while in church facilities or attending church activities? A person with a history of sex offense against children requires constant monitoring and should never be allowed to be with children alone, serve as a teacher or caregiver, or socialize with children at the church.
2. Limitations. Will the individual be excluded from specific responsibilities, activities, or areas of the church building?
3. Notification. Will notification of the individual's participation be made? If so, to whom (e.g., parents, teachers, youth sponsors, new participants, survivors) and how? Open communication allows members to ask questions and helps everyone feel safer. Being as transparent as possible is best. When abuse within the congregation surfaces, church leaders should provide an open call inviting individuals to share about their experiences with the offending individual so abuse can be reported to the authorities and support and follow-up is provided for any additional victims.
(<http://mennoniteusa.org/resource/prevention-and-response-sexual-abuse-and-non-credentialed-individuals/>)
4. Support. How will the congregation be supportive if the individual seeks to be restored to the community and participate in the congregation in a positive way? (See [COSA resource](#) below.)
5. Noncompliance. How will the congregation respond if the individual violates the terms of the agreement? What changes might be imposed (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?

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. For sample limited access agreements and checklists, see pages 30–35 of *Balancing Act* by Debra Haffner.

Conclusion

Protection must be the first priority. Keeping children and other vulnerable people from harm is essential, as well as listening to survivors and tending to their needs. When we make churches safe for survivors, we make churches safer for children. If guidelines are violated or policies are ignored by the individual with an offending history, measures must be taken to ensure safety, including possible exclusion from church participation.

Reporting child abuse is required. Regardless of congregational process or policy, 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.

Practice child protection. Guidelines for those who are known to have committed sexual offenses should never take the place of robust child protection policies and ongoing education and awareness. These measures maintain positive protective boundaries for all. Approximately 90 percent of perpetrators are known by the child, so keep a watchful eye at all times (<http://safelyeverafter.com/>). Less than 10 percent of all sex crimes result in a criminal conviction, so many sex offenders in our communities have not been identified (<http://www.atsa.com/>).

Know your limitations. Prior to including an offender with a written plan, churches should seek counsel from an outside group, such as GRACE, Dove’s Nest, area conference or denominational leadership, or another appropriate organization. Regular check-ins with an external group are advised. The congregation is not able to hold an offender legally accountable or replace professional counseling or treatment. Each congregation differs in their ability to include individuals who have committed sexual offenses. Not every congregation will be able to include every individual.

As followers of Jesus Christ, churches are 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. Prayerfully applying these guidelines within your faith community can help make this possible.

Resources

Unless otherwise noted, the Scripture quotations are from the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible, copyrighted 1989 by the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of Churches of Christ in the United States of America, and are used by permission. All rights reserved.

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*Faith Communities Keeping
Children & Youth Safe*

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