



# SAFE CHURCH POLICY AND PROCEDURES

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## Purpose

Abuse is a sensitive and an emotional issue in our society, and one most of us would prefer not to even think about it at Beckwith Hills Christian Reformed Church. We are thankful to God that He has blessed us with faithful and caring staff and volunteers, and a Council that is dedicated to protecting our members and guests.

But we also know that we live in a sinful world and that it is recognized that churches are not immune from the sins of abuse. The Synod of the Christian Reformed Church (CRC) has called for local churches "to take positive steps to make their congregations safe for all persons". On January 15, 2002, Classis Grand Rapids North approved a structure for a classical abuse · response team (SAFE Team) with the approval of Synod and the CRC Office of Abuse Prevention. The Council of Beckwith Hills CRC will appoint a Safe Church Coordinator to work with them to support a safe church ministry at Beckwith Hills CRC. We believe that Beckwith Hills CRC is safe and within the procedures outlined in this policy, we seek to keep it safe.

This policy contains two parts. Abuse Prevention Procedures is an outline of easy and reasonable steps to assure safety by preventing even the possibility of abuse while protecting church staff and volunteers from the risk of false allegations. Responding to Allegations of Abuse is a carefully thought-out plan on what church leadership would do if a volunteer or staff member were ever to be accused of abuse or if a church member were to come forward with a complaint involving abuse.

## Background

Sexual, physical and emotional abuse is a real and pressing issue in our society today. Sadly, it is also a real issue in the church. A 1989 survey conducted by a Christian Reformed Church study committee revealed that 28% of the adults surveyed had experienced some form of abuse.

Research studies of churches indicate that 92%-96% of child abuse occurs outside of church settings. The remaining 4%-8% of abuse is said to occur in some sort of church context. While it is difficult to directly intervene in abuse that occurs at home or other settings, churches can and should do something to reduce the risk of abuse within church settings. Both careful study and sensible prevention strategies are necessary in order to guarantee safety for children at church and the integrity of the ministry of the church.

The Christian Reformed Church is promoting increased awareness and prevention of abuse within the denomination. In 1992, Synod declared abuse to be "a sin against Biblical directives that govern our actions and relationships and striking evidence of the pervasive misery that has infected human life." (Acts of Synod 1992, page 673) Furthermore, Synod urged church leaders to help their congregations "to publicly acknowledge that the sin of abuse exists among us; to support efforts that such abuse be addressed promptly so that abused [persons] and abusers may experience the healing power of God's grace; and to take positive steps to make their congregations safe for all persons." (Acts of Synod 1992, page 673)

Churches must also reduce the risk for abuse in light of significant legal considerations. Because of the way churches operate, they are very susceptible to incidents of abuse. This should not be surprising when one considers the fact that most churches:

- A. Assume a high degree of trust when hiring employees and accepting volunteers,
- B. Tend to lack a screening process for workers,
- C. Provide many opportunities for close contact between adults and children,
- D. Frequently offer immediate and unsupervised access to potential victims, and
- E. Have a nearly continuous need for willing volunteers for ministry programs.

These unique characteristics increase the attractiveness and vulnerability of a congregation to potential child molesters. A church is well advised to be prepared to handle an allegation of abuse and to formulate policies and procedures that will decrease its vulnerability for abuse in the church setting. ("Reducing the Risk of Child Sexual Abuse in Your Church" by Hammar, Kliporvice, and Cobble - pg 19) Although this introduction has primarily discussed the issue of child abuse, it is also important to recognize that adults also face the potential of abuse in their interactions with persons in positions of authority within the church. Numerous news reports in recent years have recounted the situations where church leaders have sinned in their relationships with church members and non-members. Accordingly, abuse prevention policies and procedures must take into account the reality of this risk.

## Biblical Principles

"Whoever welcomes a little child like this in my name welcomes me. But if anyone causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to have a large mill-stone hung around his neck and to be drowned in the depths of the sea... See that you do not look down on one of these little ones. "For I tell you that the angels in heaven always see the face of my Father in heaven." (Matthew 18:5-6, 10-11)

It is an awesome privilege and responsibility to provide Christian guidance and instruction for covenant children and youth who participate in the various ministry programs of the church. Unfortunately this responsibility also provides an opportunity for abuse to occur, due to the sinful nature of mankind.

All forms of abuse essentially have the same root cause. Abuse is the irresponsible and selfish use of power by one human being over another. The church and its spiritual leaders have been entrusted by God and by their fellow believers with a responsibility to promote peace and justice and maintain purity in the body of Christ. When individuals seek guidance or instruction from church leaders, they make themselves vulnerable to those who serve as under-shepherds in the work of the Lord. In situations where abuse occurs, it happens as a misuse of a relationship and involves a betrayal of trust.

Scripture describes Christ as a Shepherd and the church as sheep. Spiritual leaders are called to act as Christ's under-shepherds for their individual churches. This is a position to be taken seriously as Paul reminds us in Acts. He says, "Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. Be shepherds of the church of God, which He bought with his own blood." (Acts 20:28) Abuse is a perversion of this calling to guide and care for the flock.

The Bible contains clear instructions for God's people. The prophets urged the people of Israel to "seek justice, encourage the oppressed, and plead the case of the widow." (Isaiah 1:17) These words continue to speak to the church today. Furthermore, our Lord Jesus Christ instructs his followers to be concerned for the little ones. While He is speaking of children and young people, it is clear that we need to be concerned with others in need of guidance and support. Jesus warned us that "wolves" would come disguised as sheep within the flock, and to be on guard against untrustworthy spiritual leaders.

The Bible also provides examples of abuse and its consequences. Two examples are found in the stories of Joseph and his brothers in Genesis 37 and the story of Tamar and Amnon in 2 Samuel 13. The Word of God provides clear and powerful instruction to guide the actions of the church. The issue of abuse within the church can no longer be denied or ignored.

## What Is Abuse?

In order to clearly understand the specific actions that constitute abuse, the following excerpts from Michigan's Child Protection Law and from the Acts of Synod 1995 are provided.

According to Michigan's Child Protection Law (PA 238, 1975):

"Child abuse" means harm or threatened harm to a child's health or welfare that occurs through non-accidental physical or mental injury, sexual abuse, sexual exploitation, or maltreatment, by a parent, a legal guardian, or any other person responsible for the child's health or welfare or by a teacher, a teacher's aide, or a member of the clergy."

The following definitions of child abuse (including physical, sexual and emotional abuse) were listed in the Acts of Synod 1995. Although these definitions were of child abuse actions, it should be understood that any of these actions may also be considered abusive if directed toward an adult.

1. Physical Abuse is any non-accidental human act that results in physical pain or injury to a child - whether or not it leaves a cut or wound, or a mark or a bruise. Physically abusive behavior ranges from slapping, pushing, shoving, punching, kicking, and biting to more severe forms like choking, severe spanking, beating, hitting with an object, burning, stabbing, and shooting. In other words, physical abuse is any intentional means of inflicting pain or injury to another person. It is sometimes a single event, but can also be a chronic pattern of behavior.
2. Sexual Abuse is the exploitation of a child or any sexual intimacy forced on a child for the sexual stimulation or gratification of person. Child sexual abuse can refer to taking advantage of a child who is not capable of understanding sexual acts or resisting coercion such as threats or offers of "gifts". Sexual abuse may or may not involve physical contact. Examples of non- physical sexual abuse include people exposing themselves, displaying pornographic material, photographing a child for pornographic materials, obscene telephone calls, "Peeping Toms," and requests to engage in sexual activity (where no physical contact occurs). Examples of sexual abuse involving physical contact include fondling of body parts, such as breasts, crotch, buttocks, or sexual organs, intercourse, oral and anal sex.
3. Emotional Abuse is attempting to control a child's life through words, threats and fear; and/or destroying a child's self-worth through harassment, threats, and deprivation. Emotional abuse weakens a child's mental and physical ability to resist, cuts off his or her contacts with others, and causes a gradual loss of self-esteem all of which reinforce a sense of helplessness and dependence on the abuser.

## Abuse Prevention Procedures

The following principles and procedures are to be followed in all church programs serving children at Beckwith Hills Christian Reformed Church (BHCRC) to minimize the potential for abuse. These principles and procedures are intended to assure participant safety as well as protect program leaders from the potential for allegations.

There should be a minimum of one (1) adult person and one assistant present whenever there is only one child present. Two non-adult helpers will not be considered an acceptable substitute for one adult person.

Situations where there is only one adult with one child should not occur; however, there will inevitably be exceptions - exceptions that do not defeat this policy but will occur in a normal, acceptable fashion. (For example, the adult teacher of a class is the first to arrive - or perhaps arrives after the first student appears. The teacher's assistant may show up second - after the adult teacher, but a student may very well be the second to show up - after the adult teacher.) Although it is not preferred, it is an acceptable alternative to have an adult female serve alone with a child if the door to the room is open and an unannounced Building Security Monitor visit happens during that time.

All staff members and volunteers who work with children must complete a volunteer application. The Executive Directory of Ministries at BRCRC, is responsible to check the name of staff members and volunteers using an appropriate tool such as the Michigan State Police's Internet Criminal History Access Tool ([www.michigan.gov/ichat](http://www.michigan.gov/ichat)) and the US Department of Justice National Sex Offender Public Website ([www.nsopw.gov](http://www.nsopw.gov)). Checks shall be made not less frequently than once every two years for all staff and volunteers covered by this policy. Accurate records of active staff and volunteers shall be maintained by the Executive Director of Church Ministries.

The results of these checks are to be kept confidential by BHCRC unless dictated differently by federal, state or local law.

The Safe Church Coordinator shall conduct an annual review of this policy. If changes are made to the policy at any time, the Safe Church Coordinator, in conjunction with the Education Committee shall decide if a training session is warranted, and for which staff or volunteers it is needed.

Not less than once per year, the current policy shall be distributed electronically or on paper to each staff person and volunteer covered by this policy, and a written or digital acknowledgement of its receipt and commitment to abide by it shall be received as a condition of service. No person may serve as a staff or volunteer without such acknowledgement and commitment. The Executive Director of Ministries at BHCRC is responsible for making sure this takes place.

The Safe Church Coordinator, appointed by the Council of Beckwith Hills CRC, advocates for and organizes efforts in abuse prevention, awareness, and response at BHCRC. The Safe Church Coordinator works toward the following guiding goals:

- Policy: Assist the Council in setting and living into safe church policy by: verifying that written policies are being implemented and by regularly reviewing and recommending changes to the Safe Programs Policy and Procedures adopted by the Council.

- Education: Assist the Education Committee assess the need for education and training and assist in implementing and coordinating programs that 1) teach children and youth about healthy, respectful relationships, 2) provide educational opportunities for the congregation and 3) offer training for the council, staff, and ministry leaders about healthy boundaries and the dynamics of power in ministry relationships.

#### Nursery (Birth – PreK)

1. At least two attendants are to be on duty whenever nursery care is provided, even if only one child is present. The attendants are not to be married couples. At least one attendant is to be an adult; no more than two minor boys at a time may be scheduled as attendants. (see Abuse Prevention Procedures)
2. Only scheduled attendants are to be in the nursery. Substitutes must be approved nursery volunteers. Attendants shall sign in upon arrival on a form provided and visible in the nursery. Administrative staff serving in the role of Nursery Coordinator shall keep these records for two years.
3. A child will be released only to the parent/caregiver or a known family member.
4. Bathroom use and diapering in the nursery are to occur according to the Bathroom Assistance Policy (see below).
5. Parents/caregivers will be contacted if their assistance is needed. The Building Security Monitor may be contacted for assistance in case of an emergency.
6. Whenever exceptions are made to these procedures, these exceptions must be recorded by the one initiating the exception and reported to the church's Safe Church Coordinator.

#### Children's Church (PreK-1st) and Sunday School (Grades 2-6)

1. At least one adult shall be present to ensure the safety and supervision of the children. This is consistent with the statement in the Abuse Prevention Procedures. e.g. two non-adult helpers is not a substitute for the requirement of an adult being present.
2. Regarding bathroom use for children: See "Bathroom Assistance Policy".
3. Parents/caregivers will be contacted when their assistance is needed. The Building Security Monitor may be contacted for assistance in case of an emergency.
4. Departures from these procedures must be reported to the Safe Church Coordinator.

#### Youth Ministry

1. Counselors and Teachers are to maintain a high level of awareness regarding the location of their youth/students at all times.
2. If a one-on-one meeting (youth/student and adult) is desired, the Counselor or Teacher shall obtain the consent of the parent and meet only in public places. One-on-one meetings during sessions shall be in view of other members of the group.
3. Departures from these procedures must be reported to the Safe Church Coordinator.

#### Bathroom Assistance

Philosophy: It is our desire to provide protection for every adult's reputation and safety for every child entrusted to us. The following policies and procedures reflect this desire.

1. Nursery: The nursery changing table is to remain in view of other attendants. Diapering, if done, is to be done only by adult nursery attendants. When providing bathroom assistance to

preschoolers in the nursery, the adult is to stand outside the room while leaving the door slightly open while the child uses the bathroom. If the child requests assistance, the adult is to leave the door open while assisting the child. Only adults are permitted to assist children.

2. Children's Church (Pre-k - First Graders): When there is a need for a child to use the restroom, the classroom teacher shall contact the adult responsible for that child. Upon being notified the adult shall proceed directly to the appropriate classroom and take responsibility for toileting only the child for which he or she is responsible. If the parent/caregiver does not respond or is otherwise not able to respond, the adult teacher will contact the BSM to provide assistance. The assistance and manner in which it is provided should satisfy the principles established in the Abuse Prevention Procedures.
3. Children in 2nd - 6th grade: These children shall use a "buddy system" when using the bathroom.

### Transporting Minors

Any church activity, regardless of location, that requires moving children in vehicles must adhere to the following:

- All drivers must be at least 21 years old, have a valid driver's license and have current automobile insurance.
- The number of persons per car should not exceed the number of seat belts.
- Each vehicle should have at least 2 children for every adult. If 2 adults are not in the vehicle, the driver should obtain parental permission to drive the children and should avoid a 1:1 ratio with a child that is not their own.

### Building Security Monitors

- Building Security Monitors must be present for the entire Sunday School hour through the end of the Morning Worship Service.
- When classes are in session, a Building Security Monitor shall make periodic unannounced inspections of all church spaces. At minimum, the inspections will be done once during Sunday school hours and once during worship service sessions. The Building Security Monitor will document inspection by signing an inspection form.
- If a parent/caregiver does not respond or is otherwise not able to respond for bathroom assistance, the Building Security Monitor may be called upon to provide assistance.
- 15 minutes after the worship service begins, all doors are to be locked, with the exception of the front main door.
- Building Security Monitors are to sign the log book regarding their activity each time they serve.

### Guidelines for Pastoral Ministries

1. When possible and appropriate, Elders, Deacons, Household of Faith Leaders, and Pastor are encouraged to make visits in teams.
2. Elders, Deacons, Household of Faith Leaders and Pastor are to exercise good judgment when conducting visits alone. When appropriate, it is preferable to meet in public places (such as a restaurant).
3. Be extremely cautious with the use of touch, as it can very often be misunderstood and misinterpreted. In general, one should not initiate an action that might be interpreted as



intimate. Similarly, one should not permit or encourage such an action from the person one is visiting.

4. Elders, Deacons and Pastor are to report all pastoral care visits to their respective supervising bodies, except where to do so would involve the inappropriate disclosure of confidential information. In such cases, careful documentation of all visits or meetings is recommended.

## Responding to Allegations of Abuse

In the event that an abuse allegation is made against any person serving in either a paid or voluntary capacity at Beckwith Hills Christian Reformed Church (BHCRC), the Elders are responsible to implement the following actions. If the allegation of abuse involves staff or volunteers of a different church, the matter should be handled through referral to the CRC Office on Abuse Prevention.

### 1) Initial Action Following an Allegation

- a) Notification:
  - i) Any allegation or complaint of physical, sexual or emotional abuse involving a staff member or volunteer of BHCRC is to be brought to the immediate attention of the Pastor. The Pastor shall notify the Vice- President of Council within 24 hours. If an Elder is notified, he shall notify the Pastor and Vice-President of Council within 24 hours. The Pastor and Vice-President of Council will ask the complainant to put the allegations into writing and will offer the complainant the choice to pursue the allegation(s) with either the elders of the church or to the chairperson of the Classis Grand Rapids North SAFE Team. The complainant should be strongly advised to use the Classis Grand Rapids North SAFE Team in order to minimize bias.
  - ii) The Elders should request a SAFE Team advisory panel to conduct an investigation on its behalf. The Elders should handle the matter itself only under the most unusual of circumstances: If the Classis SAFE Team process is not utilized, the Elders are responsible to process the allegation using the methods described below as belonging to the Classis SAFE Team.
  - iii) The complainant may independently request a Classis SAFE team panel hearing; in which case the Classis SAFE Team chairperson will inform the Elders that a panel hearing has been requested.
  - iv) Regardless of who is contacted first, an immediate determination is to be made as to the need for notification of the Child Protective Services (CPS) division of the Michigan Department of Health and Human Services if the circumstances of the allegation involve the possible abuse of a minor. Under Michigan law, clergy are required to report actual or suspected incidents of child abuse.
  - v) A person who receives allegations of a child against a church leader (which will hereafter refer to a paid staff, office bearer, or appointed ministry volunteer) and concludes that the allegations create a reasonable suspicion that abuse may have occurred, should report the matter to local police or CPS within twenty-four hours of receiving the information.
- b) Administrative Leave of the Accused Person from Volunteer or Employment Responsibilities:

- i) The Elders shall immediately place the accused person on an administrative leave, which relieves the accused person from his/her regular duties (with applicable pay and without prejudice) pending the outcome of the investigation.
- c) Processing of Allegations:
  - i) The Classis SAFE Team role is to evaluate the gravity and probable veracity of the allegations but has no separate authority to act except as directed by the Elders. (This reduces the influence of bias and allows the accused and accuser to meet with the participant who may be able to formulate a more objective opinion.) The Council, through the Elders, continues to have ultimate responsibility for implementing the procedures for responding to abuse allegations listed below.
  - ii) A written report will be presented by a Classis SAFE Team representative to the Elders of the accused person's church. The Elders should meet within one week to review the SAFE Team's report. The SAFE Team chairperson will contact the complainant verbally or in writing to report its findings.
  - iii) The SAFE Team will maintain complete confidentiality but will discuss its findings with the Elders throughout the process. The Team is expected to maintain a "presumption of innocence" toward the accused person during its investigation.
- d) Communication:
  - i) The Elders, with input from the SAFE Team and working with the Executive Director of Ministries, is responsible to develop a plan for communication and implement it. The plan must consider the role of the accused person within the congregation while remaining sensitive to the needs for privacy of all parties that are involved.
  - ii) If the accused person and the complainant or alleged victim are not family members, neither the Elders nor the SAFE Team should request or plan for a complainant or alleged victim to meet with the accused person during the investigation.

**2) Response of Accused Person to the Allegation:**

- a) If there is sufficient reason to believe there may have been an incident of abuse, the Classis SAFE Team shall meet with the accused person to:
  - i) present him/her with the formal written allegation statement,
  - ii) describe the process which will be used in response to the allegation, emphasizing the "presumption of innocence"
  - iii) hear his/her direct response to the written allegation statement and obtain a written response, and
  - iv) prepare a summary statement for the complainant or alleged victim of the accused person's response to the allegation.
- b) Upon completion of these activities, the SAFE Team will report its findings to the church's Elders and determine if there is reason to believe that there has been an incident of abuse. If additional information is required, the SAFE Team may conduct a supplementary investigation using whatever additional sources (interviews, documentation, etc.) may be required. If no further information is required, the Elders will proceed to make its determination/recommendation.

### **3) Determination / Recommendation:**

- a) The Elders, upon conclusion of the SAFE Team investigation and relying upon its best judgment, is to prepare a recommendation to the Council of one of the following determinations of finding:
  - i) ALLEGATION(S) **ARE NOT** SUBSTANTIATED: If this determination is recommended by the SAFE Team and Elders, and adopted by the Council, the investigation is to be concluded. A clear and unambiguous statement is to be made by the Council to all who were previously informed of the allegation as to the exoneration of the accused person. The Elders shall coordinate the provision of ongoing care and concern for both the accused person and the complainant.
  - ii) ALLEGATION(S) ARE SUBSTANTIATED: If this determination is recommended by the SAFE Team and Elders and is adopted by the Council, an appropriate disciplinary action should be taken by the Council from among the following options:
    - 1. EDUCATIONAL ADVISORY - The Council may issue an educational advisory to the accused person in response to a situation that is more indicative of poor judgment than intentional abuse.
    - 2. REPRIMAND - The Council may censure the accused person in response to abuse or neglect that was persistent and resulted in/or could have resulted in serious harm to others.
    - 3. SUSPENSION - The Council may choose to suspend the accused person from any position of responsibility that may expose others to harm. The suspension shall continue until such time as the Council has clear and convincing evidence of rehabilitation and restoration.
    - 4. TERMINATION - The Council may terminate the accused person from any position of responsibility that may expose others to harm. The termination shall generally be considered to be permanent. This decision may be reversed by the Council only after a careful and thorough review which is initiated by extraordinary or compelling circumstances, and with due regard to the need to protect the integrity of the church's ministry.

### **4) Pastoral Care Planning:**

- a) The Council, through the Elders, shall develop a plan for pastoral care for the victim and for the accused or offending individuals.
  - i) For a victim, the plan shall include the provision of compassionate pastoral care that encourages healing and wholeness, with the eventual and ultimate goal of reconciliation and forgiveness.
  - ii) For a falsely accused person, the plan shall include affirmations of acceptance and efforts to restore whatever relationships may have been strained or distorted during the period of investigation.
  - iii) For a person found to have offended, the plan shall include firm and direct expectations for the offender to seek whatever spiritual or emotional assistance which may be needed in order to achieve restoration. A goal shall be to instill a spirit of genuine repentance and confession of misdeeds in the heart of the offender.
- b) The Elders shall not recommend that a complainant and/or victim have any direct contact, conversation or other communication with an offender or accused person

following the investigation without first seriously considering the wisdom of such a recommendation. Just as there are situations in which it may be encouraged, there are also times when it would never be appropriate. The Elders are encouraged to obtain skilled consultation prior to making such a recommendation.