

*Mennonite Church Canada
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Lack of policy threatens liability insurance for congregations

Winnipeg, Man.— An absence of volunteer screening and abuse prevention policies is threatening liability insurance coverage for some churches. Some congregations have already lost a portion of their liability coverage.

So far, incidents of threatened coverage have occurred in BC and Ontario churches, reports Kirsten Schroeder, human resources director at Mennonite Church Canada. “Insurance companies and the legal system are considering the lack of such policies to be a sign of negligent behavior,” said Schroeder. “I have little doubt that this will become a wider and more pressing concern in the future,” she added.

In response, Schroeder has developed a Volunteer Screening Guide to help congregations develop their own volunteer screening and abuse prevention policies. It identifies those volunteers who work with children, youth, at-risk adults, and in some cases, seniors as people working in “high-risk service areas”.

Some denominations with policies already in place include the Mennonite Brethren Church, the United Church of Canada, and the United Baptist Convention of Atlantic Provinces. “Churches are places of peace and justice. Developing policies like this will help us respond in helpful and consistent ways when issues arise,” said Schroeder.

Since specific laws vary from province to province, Schroeder suggests that congregations with similar needs work together regionally at formulating policies. She offers the following tips to consider when developing documents:

- Consider the nature of your programs; Are you a rural or urban congregation? Who will the volunteers and program serve – children from the community, seniors, or?
- If your church or program is large and volunteers do not know the participants personally, consider identification procedures and a sign-out system for your Sunday School.
- Test your procedures and policies within your community and respond to feedback.
- Have the policy reviewed by legal counsel.

The six-page document is filled with helpful information and references to additional sources. It is available to MC Canada congregations through the November issue of *Equipping*. The guide and a sample policy developed by the Listowel congregation (Ontario) are also available from the MC Canada web site at

<http://www.mennonitechurch.ca/resources/financehr/volunteers/index.htm>.