VOLUNTEER SCREENING GUIDE

In Ontario and B.C., many churches have already experienced the reality of having a portion of their liability insurance threatened or removed due to the absence of adequate volunteer screening policies. This is because insurance companies and the legal courts are considering the lack of such policies to be a sign of negligent behavior. Although liability insurance is or will be a concern for all churches in the near future, we want to acknowledge first and foremost that it is the church’s responsibility to provide a safe place for all people, and that its most vulnerable members must be protected to the utmost of our capabilities.

Abuse policies are primarily written:
- to make the Church a safe place
- to prevent and minimize the possibility of the occurrence of abuse
- to protect workers from false allegations of abuse

WHY A VOLUNTEER SCREENING POLICY?

A number of churches are beginning to look at a screening or abuse prevention policy for their volunteers, especially for those workers in high-risk service areas. Screening volunteers is primarily built into the recruiting and orientation stages, but it works throughout the volunteer leadership cycle from planning to evaluation. Careful screening brings added value to the volunteer program because it requires planners to know what they are asking for from volunteers, tells the volunteers that their contributions are highly valued, and increases the sense of job mission. This can lead to greater satisfaction, and subsequently greater retention, of volunteers.

As participants in Mennonite Church Canada and the missional church, the writing of these policies clearly flows out of our mission to “…facilitate God’s mission in the world, so that all people may find healing and hope in all circumstances of life.”

Every church should have written volunteer screening policies tailored to meet its own needs. In order to assist you in writing and implementing policies for your church, the subsequent sections provide some background and guidelines for your use. In addition:

- We recommend that you borrow or purchase the manual Screening in faith, which outlines a 10-step approach to faith-based screening. It is available for purchase from Volunteer Canada or the MC Canada Resource Centre.
- Call your local volunteer centre for a one-on-one consultation on how to develop policies.
- Get a copy of Reducing the risk of child sexual abuse in the church, which may be borrowed from the Resource Centre or purchased by contacting Church Law Today. It guides church leaders as to how to educate the church on this topic, and provides a very useful video and audio cassette tape for this purpose.
Once you have developed a volunteer screening policy, please get some legal advice to ensure that you have comprehensive policies and an implementation plan that will suit the needs of all the people in your church.

[A] OUR RESPONSIBILITIES

POSSIBILITY OF ABUSE

Jeremiah 6:13-14 – “…and from prophet to priest, everyone deals falsely. They dress the wound of my people as though it were not serious. ‘Peace, peace,’ they say, when there is no peace.”

The topic of sexual abuse in the church can produce a great sense of uneasiness and a reluctance or even resistance to talking about it. For those who have experienced a deep level of trust and care in their own family and church lives, it is disturbing to consider its very existence. However, this is a situation that can and does occur, both inside and outside of the church, in Mennonite and non-Mennonite homes (Block, 1991. Assault on God’s image: Domestic abuse). In our pursuit of peace and justice, “…we must remember that silence and inaction can perpetuate violence” (Barrett, 1998, p.6, A Mennonite statement and study on violence), and that it is our duty as leaders of church programs to talk about potential abuses and build safe structures that protect those entrusted to our care.

As Lois Barrett writes (p. 9) “When any congregation meets for worship, undoubtedly victims, survivors, and perpetrators of abuse are present.” In addressing this issue, one must also consider that church volunteer programs are very attractive places for “…sexual predators. They have large numbers of children, a shortage of willing workers and a culture of trust that no Christian could be suspect of such exploitation…” (Bob Harvey, quoted in the CCCC Bulletin [Sept. 2002]). Our volunteer recruitment methods must be examined in light of this, and certain screens put in place to prevent easy access to our children, youth and other vulnerable members.

Duty of Care

For most of our churches there is a heavy reliance on volunteers to run children’s Sunday School and youth programs. In these and other cases where there is a stronger, more powerful and responsible person and a weaker, more vulnerable person, we have established a relationship based on duty of care. Duty of care can be applicable to relationships between adults as well (for example, visiting senior citizens, teaching mentally handicapped adults).

Duty of Care is a legal term that binds us all. Generally speaking, it requires that a person exercises reasonable care (or a Standard of Care) towards another as the circumstances require. One would be negligent in the eyes of the law if there was a failure to exercise a reasonable standard of care where the duty of care was present.

POWER, VULNERABILITY & JUSTICE

Micah 6:8 – “and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?”

Many of us are traditionally uncomfortable with the concept of power in churches. However, power exists in all relationships whether it is acknowledged or not. Not acknowledging the existence of power in situations can often lead to abuse within a relationship. Recognition of the
power relationship can also help us to become better and more responsible leaders when the power imbalance is in our favor.

It may be helpful to think of power in relation to vulnerability. Imagining two people in relationship, usually one will possess greater resources and one will possess fewer. How the resources are defined can vary, but it is rarely unclear who possesses the greater resources in relation to the other. The existence of this dynamic leads to two presuppositions: First, that there is a greater potential for abusing if one has the greater resources, and second, that in a given relationship the person with more is accountable for the proper use of resources and abstinence from abusing those with less.

If we are to provide all persons with a chance for hope and healing, it will be based on the seeking and provision of justice for all. Foundational to this process is an environment of openness and frank discussion about power and the types of violence that exist in our interpersonal relationships.

**Resources**


### [B] DEVELOPING YOUR SCREENING POLICIES AND PROCEDURES

In order to have an effective screening policy, you church must write and implement one that suits its particular needs. It will be influenced by “…many factors: the province; the type of community (urban, rural, large, small, northern, southern); the nature of the programs being run; the belief system of the community; the age of the participant involved; and the socio-economic level of the program participants.” (s.3.5, Screening in faith). If you are a larger church, you may have to devise additional policies and procedures addressing how to run a program where workers do not know children or adults – do you need sign-out and identification procedures, waiver forms for parents and guardians to sign?

The creation of abuse prevention policies is best written and tested within the community. A representative team should be selected to process the church-specific issues surrounding policy creation. It is helpful to select a group of 4-5 members of your church to write these policies, with further review done by qualified legal counsel. In addition to selecting the right screening elements for your low, medium and high risk volunteer positions, you will need to consider how you will regularly train people on the policies (just having them on paper isn’t enough).

Planning and implementing a good volunteer program depends on recruiting (advertising, screening, interviewing and covenanting), orienting (interviewing, training, sharing faith statements and vision, codes of conduct or expectations, and procedures and guidelines), supervising (regular feedback, interaction, and recognition) and evaluating (the program and
incorporating it into future planning). Screening is an element that is intertwined with all of these factors – effective screening is incorporated throughout effective volunteer management processes.

To engage in an effective volunteer screening or risk management process, you will need to:

1. Write job descriptions for each volunteer position (i.e., Sunday School Teacher, Youth Worker),
2. Assess the risk factors associated in each job and classify the position as either low, medium or high risk,
3. Determine what screens are available to you that will answer questions about the risks associated with that category and write your screening policies,
4. Recruit volunteers with the job description, clarify the expectations of a person holding this position and apply your screening measures, and
5. Covenant with, orient and supervise the volunteer.

The additional benefits of this kind of a process is that your recruitment will be much more effective, as people like to know what they are doing and what is expected of them in clear, written terms. This often leads to a higher satisfaction level among your volunteers and, subsequently, better retention of volunteers (good news for stressed recruiters). A more in-depth look at the first three steps follows.

1. **JOB DESCRIPTIONS – MATCH VOLUNTEERS WITH THE RIGHT PLACEMENT**

   *Ephesians 4:11 “And He gave some as apostles, and some as prophets, and some as evangelists, and some as pastors and teachers.”*

   Recruiting volunteer workers is primarily a people job, where you are trying to match the right person with the right job. As you go about this, consider the following points:

   - Know what you are asking volunteers to do and know what qualifications they need to perform the job. Provide accurate and regularly updated job descriptions.
   - Brainstorm areas of service in your program that might lead to a better use of skills and talents and to provide more opportunities for people to participate (could they be a Sunday School Supply Shopper or News Reporter)?
   - Help potential volunteers to identify how their purpose, passion and gifts can be used to fulfill a need in the church – should they be working directly with children, more indirectly in support of the program (treasurer or curriculum coordinator) or not associated with the program at all?

   Letting people know up front that you have a selective and intentional process of matching the right person with the right job sends a clear message that volunteers are valued, the people they serve are valued, and that high-risk positions are not open to all who express an interest.

2. **ASSESS LEVELS OF RISK AND RISK MANAGEMENT**

   The activity of risk management can begin once you have described your programs and positions. You can then assess the level of risk involved in each service area and job by considering the question “what could go wrong here and how do we avoid it?” (s.3.1, Screening in faith).

   Typically, those working with children and youth will be in the highest risk category. You may also have programs involving seniors or working with special needs adults that are high risk as well. You may also have some jobs that you classify as moderate risk (money collection, persons not directly involved with children’s or youth ministries) and low risk (typing non-confidential documents).
3. POLICY GUIDELINES AND SCREENING MEASURES
The following guidelines are only some of the questions you should ask while drafting your volunteer policies. See the manual Screening in faith for a comprehensive list.

a) Context
Set the framework of your policies within the following context:

- Church’s vision, mission or purpose and faith statements and the purpose or mandate of the particular ministry area
- Purpose of the policy. Why are you writing this and who does it apply to? Is this an inclusive policy dealing with various forms of abuse of power, i.e., physical, emotional and sexual abuse? What about appropriate discipline in the classroom? Elsewhere? Include definitions of terms, including “duty of care”. (Examples of Volunteer Screening Policies, Codes of Conduct: Boy Scouts Code of Conduct for Adults, found at http://www.tbaytel.net/~scouts/dutycare.htm. What should a child protection policy contain? http://www.ccpas.co.uk/cpcontain.htm).
- Note that the denomination’s Ministerial Sexual Misconduct Policy and Procedure (2000) Version 9.12.00 is the process that must be applied to all cases involving alleged misconduct involving pastors. Your church should have a copy of this document. If not you may obtain one by contacting your area conference minister. You should also consider whether you have current hiring and sexual abuse/harassment policies for paid church staff in place or whether these need to be developed.

b) Screening Measures

- Volunteer Application Forms – you should have one for every volunteer. Think about what you need to know to appropriately match the volunteer with the job.
- Job Descriptions – you should have one for every volunteer, outlining the qualifications expected and the screening measures used for each position.
- Interviewing and reference checks – consider who will do this, and what kind and number of reference checks will be required (the volunteer’s former pastor or volunteer coordinator?). Who will keep records and how will they be stored?
- Requests for criminal and child abuse registry checks – the process is different in every province. Call your local volunteer centre or police for local information.
- Length of time a candidate must have been a “member” in the church prior to volunteering in a moderate to high risk position (what do you consider to be an acceptable definition of “membership” for volunteer purposes?). Currently six months to one year is the most common.

c) Operational procedures

- Consider team and group teaching approaches in classrooms to increase visibility of interactions.
- The church should have appropriate forms and guidelines for reference checks and other screening documents. Consider who will generate, have access to and control how documents are kept. Note that Canada’s Privacy laws will impact the kind of records you keep and how they must be stored.
- How will bathroom assistance and diaper changing be handled and who will do it?
- Obtain the necessary parental consent forms for off-premises and other activities.
- Think about how to structure typically one-on-one ministries, such as youth mentor programs, to provide more observability and less chance of isolation.
d) Physical Modifications
- Modify spaces that provide too much privacy, especially in the children’s and youth ministry areas. Ministry areas should be observable. Add windows to doors and consider other adjustments.
- Consider field trips, camping trips and sleeping arrangements. How will the environment be configured to provide safe supervision and meet necessary individual privacy needs? How will emergency situations be dealt with?

e) Orientation
- In Canada, it is the law for all adults to report suspected child abuse to the appropriate authorities immediately. You should make sure that all volunteers and adults in the church understand this, and you may want to include a list of the signs of abuse in your policy.
- How will you orient new volunteers to their jobs and help current and returning volunteers to transition to the new structure?

f) Supervision
- Random visits to classrooms and other activities should be conducted on a regular basis.
- Regular interaction, feedback and training on policies are a part of maintaining healthy volunteers.

[C] INCIDENTS: REPORTING AND RESPONDING

DUTY TO REPORT TO THE AUTHORITIES
As stated before, it is the law in Canada for all adults to immediately report suspected child abuse to the appropriate authorities. This is usually your local child & family services protection agency or the police. You do not investigate the incident, and so no investigation procedures need to be written. However, you will want to establish procedures to ensure that all involved will receive a caring and appropriate response from the church body.
If you are unsure as to whether to report a situation, call your local child and family services agency for advice – they will be able to counsel you whether further investigation is warranted. The person who is reporting the incident will also want to inform the lead pastor, unless the complaint is against that individual.

THE CHURCH’S RESPONSE
The church should not interfere in the investigation process, but will want to provide an appropriate response to all parties and their families. Immediately upon the report of a complaint, the accused should be removed from their position until the conclusions of the investigation are released. If an abuse accusation occurs, your church and its members will need to work through the process. A task force of 3-5 impartial members should be struck to process the issues surrounding the investigation and after the investigation. Churches are encouraged to approach their local area conferences or this office for additional advice and support. Some of the issues the committee should consider are:

- Contacting appropriate church leaders (lead minister, area conference minister, denominational minister), lawyer and insurer
- How and what to communicate to the congregation
- Confidentiality
- Conflict of Interest
- Obtaining pastoral care or counseling outside of the church for all parties involved, including family members
- Assisting the congregation in processing the incident
- Reporting transferring members confirmed incidents of abuse to the receiving church
- Reviewing the process upon completion and report of the findings with an eye to improving policies and procedures

Thinking about these issues and having clear guidelines beforehand will help you immensely in dealing with an allegation when and if it occurs.

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