

# Mt. Pleasant Church of God

## Safe Sanctuary Policy

Revised: August 2014

**Introduction:** In accordance with the recommendation from the Eastern Regional Conference, Mt. Pleasant Church of God created a Safe Sanctuary Policy aimed at reducing the risk of child sexual abuse in the church. This policy will reflect what we believe to be a Biblical mandate to protect children,..."that to abuse a child verbally, physically, sexually, or in any manner destroys the child's self-worth and dignity, and offends the Master who claimed all children as His own. In addition, to neglect a child physically, emotionally, etc., is child abuse by omission." (Report of the Committee on Resolutions, Vol. 1, pg. 5)

This Biblical mandate is found throughout scripture.

- Jesus said, "Whoever welcomes a child...welcomes me." (Matthew 18:5) Children are our present and our future, our hope, our teachers, our inspiration. They are full participants in the life of the church and in the realm of God.
- Jesus also said, "If any of you put a stumbling block before one of these little ones..., it would be better for you if a great millstone were fastened around your neck and you were drowned in the depth of the sea." (Matthew 18:6) Our Christian faith calls us to offer both hospitality and protection to the little ones, the children. As such, "be resolved that we the Churches of God, General Conference oppose any and all forms of child abuse." (Report of the Committee on Resolutions, Vol. 1, pg. 5)
- Tragically, churches have not always been safe places for children. Child sexual abuse, exploitation and ritual abuse occur in churches, large and small, urban and rural. The problem cuts across all economic, cultural and racial lines. It is real, and it appears to be increasing. Most annual conferences can cite specific incidents of child sexual abuse and exploitation within churches. Virtually every congregation has among its members adult survivors of early sexual trauma.
- Every Christian has the responsibility to stop child abuse. Therefore, the Mt. Pleasant Church of God adopts this policy and its accompanying procedures to demonstrate our absolute and unwavering commitment to the physical safety and spiritual growth of all our children, youth, senior citizens and at-risk adults.

**Statement of Covenant:** In all our ministries with children, youth, and adults, we are committed to demonstrating the love of Jesus Christ so that each person may "...come together to encourage one another, to help one another, to show love, to do good, and to bear one another's burdens." (*We Believe* book)

## **Definitions of Abuse:**

- Physical Abuse - abuse in which a person deliberately and intentionally causes bodily harm to a child.
- Emotional Abuse - abuse in which a person exposes a child to spoken and/or unspoken violence or emotional cruelty.
- Neglect - abuse in which a person endangers a child's health, safety, or welfare through negligence.
- Sexual Abuse - abuse in which sexual contact between a child and an adult (or another older and more powerful youth) occurs.
- Ritual Abuse - abuse in which physical, sexual, or psychological violations of a child are inflicted regularly, intentionally, and in a stylized way by a person or persons responsible for the child's welfare.
- Abuse of vulnerable adults - ritual, emotional, or sexual abuse of any person over 18 years of age with physical, mental, and/or developmental disabilities.

**The church at risk:** Any organization involved with young people is a place where abuse could occur. Several factors make local congregations, districts, and conferences more susceptible to risk:

- Churches behave as relatively trusting organizations, relying upon their members and their leaders to conduct themselves appropriately. Sometimes this trusting attitude persists even in the face of questions or reports of misconduct.
- Churches are notoriously inactive when it comes to screening its volunteers and/or employees who work with children and youth. Often, no investigation is done at all before total strangers are welcomed aboard.
- Churches routinely provide opportunities for close contact and for close personal relationships with children. Indeed, these relationships are nurtured and encouraged as we try to live out the gospel message.

## **Consequences of Abuse:**

- When one child is abused within a church or Christian program, many victims are created, including the child, the child's family, the congregation and often the family of the abuser.
- The congregation becomes the victim after abuse is revealed and relationships are fractured. It may also suffer for a long time when civil or criminal litigation ensues as a result of the abuse.
- Of foremost importance is the child who has been harmed and for whom care must be provided

No congregation or annual conference can afford, either financially, ethically, or morally to fail to implement strategies for the reduction and prevention of any and every kind of abuse. Therefore, it shall be the policy and covenant of the Mt. Pleasant Church of God to do everything in our power to prevent physical, emotional or sexual abuse against children, youth, and vulnerable adults involved in any ministry sponsored by the Mt. Pleasant Church of God.

Further, we are called to minister to those persons who are experiencing abuse and to those who have been victims of abuse in the past. To that end, we covenant to be aware of our legal responsibilities and to comply with those responsibilities and go beyond those responsibilities when necessary to act justly in the best interest of those who have been abused or those who are most vulnerable to abuse.

Careful screening is the best way to reduce the risk of abuse of children, youth and vulnerable adults. It can be time consuming and expensive, but well worth the effort and peace of mind that comes with having the most reliable, committed and experienced staff and volunteers in place for every program that involves children, youth and vulnerable adults.

Although it is our fervent hope and prayer that child sexual abuse does not occur in our programs, we must put into place sufficient mechanisms to reduce the risk of abuse of children, youth, and those who work with them. For that purpose, our ministries shall implement the following procedures in congregational ministry programs and events.

### **Standards, Criteria and Responsibilities**

**Minimum Age:** The following standards for authority figures (whether volunteers or staff) are designed to separate authority figures from the group they are serving by age or enough years to reinforce recognition of the authority figure's role.

- Authority figures- defined as the primary leaders of youth and children's activities:
  - To work with youth (grade six and up), the authority figure must be a minimum of age 18 and it is recommended they are at least four years older than the youth involved.
  - To work with children (infants through fifth grade), the authority figure must be a minimum of age 18.
- Assistants- defined as persons who lend aid to the authority figure and act at the discretion of the authority figure. Whether working with youth or children, assistants must be:
  - A minimum of 12 years of age and four years older than the participants.
  - In the judgment of a staff member, competent to assist in the activity.
  - An assistant less than 18 years of age may not be counted as an adult in the child/adult ratios.
  - An assistant must lend aid with at least two authority figures present.

**Two-Adult Rule:** A minimum of two non-related (recommended) adults are to be utilized in all programming with children, youth and vulnerable adults. When it is impossible to staff with two adults, there must be an additional adult serving as a floater with visual and physical access to all areas.

**Definition of a Floater** - A floater is an individual, at least 22 years of age, who will be assigned for a specific Sunday to move between the children's classrooms in the basement of the church as well as the youth classrooms in the fellowship hall. The floater will have visual and physical access to all these specified areas at unspecified times.

**Open-Door Policy:** Classrooms or childcare rooms should be open to visitation at any time without prior notice by staff, parents, or other volunteers. Our children and youth classroom doors have been modified to have windows and/or half-doors to coincide with the Safe Sanctuary guidelines.

**Sign-in and Sign-out Procedures:** Sign-in and sign-out procedures should be in place for all ministries for and with children: infants through fifth grade.

**Six-Month Rule:** It is highly recommended that a six-month rule be established in the selection of volunteers wishing to give service in the areas of children and youth ministry for non-outreach activities. This means that all volunteers demonstrate an active relationship in good standing in the congregation here at Mt. Pleasant for a minimum of six months. Persons not meeting this minimum requirement may serve only in an assistant capacity with two other non-related adults. (This will be monitored by the Chairperson of the Christian Education Commission).

### **Recruiting, Screening and Training**

#### **Recruiting and Screening Volunteer and Paid Staff:**

1. All persons 18 years or older employed or volunteering as an authority figure for children/youth shall:
  - a. Complete an Application/Commitment Form
  - b. Be interviewed by the director of the ministry or designated ministry staff.
  - c. Attend training that is facilitated by the Christian Education Commission.
  - d. Consent to the following background checks:
    - ✓ Multi-state criminal and sexual offender check based on social security number
    - ✓ Motor vehicle records (for those who will be transporting children, youth or vulnerable adults)
    - ✓ A background check is valid for two years

## Safe Sanctuaries Checklist for Alleged Child Abuse

### Immediately as the “representative”:

- ✓ Assure the child’s safety. (The safety of the victim is the primary concern)
- ✓ Remove accused abuser from further involvement with children or youth.
  - Treat accused abuser with dignity, not hostility.
- ✓ Notify the Sr. Pastor and Church Council President
  - The Sr. Pastor and Council President will assist the reporting “representative” make a written report of (to include the following):
    - The names and addresses of the child and the child’s parents or other caregivers of the child, if known.
    - Where the suspected abuse occurred.
    - The age and sex of subjects of the report.
    - The nature and extent of the suspected abuse, including any evidence of prior abuse to the child or siblings of the child.
    - The name and relationship of the person responsible for causing the suspected abuse, if known, and any evidence of prior abuse by that person.
    - Family composition.
    - The source of the report and any actions taken by that source.
    - Any other information that may help in the investigation.
    - Completion of any forms as required by state law.(CY-47 form)
- ✓ Notify child protective services or law enforcement agency.
  - **PA Child Line Services (1-800-932-0313)**
  - **Carroll Township Police Dept. (717-432-3317)**
- ✓ Deal with the congregation honestly, concisely, but do not give unnecessary details, place blame, interfere with victim or accused person’s privacy, and do not violate confidentiality concerns.
- ✓ Cooperate fully with the investigation conducted by law enforcement or child protective services.

### Sr. Pastor and Council President Responsibilities:

- ✓ Notify the parents.
  - If the alleged abuse took place on church property by a church volunteer or employee, both parents will be notified immediately.  
If the alleged abuser is one of the parents, notify the other parent.
- ✓ Notify Eastern Regional Conference Representative.
  - Director of Congregational Care & Renewal.
- ✓ Notify the church’s insurance agent.
  - Brotherhood Mutual Insurance (1-800-333-3735)
- ✓ Notify the church’s Attorney.
  - Mary A. Dissinger (717-957-3474)
- ✓ Keep written record of the steps taken by the church in response.