

Safe Church Policy

Revised 2021



INTRODUCTION

The Christian Reformed denomination has taken bold steps to increase awareness about the devastating impact of physical, emotional, and sexual abuse. Study committee reports to Synod of 1992 and 1994 communicated anguish over numerous stories of abuse and the unspeakable damage done to minors who have been victimized by parents, family members, church members - almost always someone who professed to care about the minor.

Committee members translated the pain they were hearing into a call for justice and mercy.

Synod, through the CRCNA Safe Church Ministry, mandated that its leaders be educated about the dynamics of abuse. It urged the development of a denomination-wide prevention and treatment program, expressed support for making its members aware of the harmful effects of abuse, and directed members to pursue biblically healthy relationships modeled after Jesus Christ.

This policy provides a basis for a comprehensive abuse prevention program for the fellowship of believers at Creston Church. The purpose of our Safe Church Policy is to ensure the physical, emotional, and spiritual wellbeing of each person in our church by establishing policies and procedures for conduct.

We do this so that the kingdom of God becomes a place where *"They will neither harm nor destroy on all my holy mountain, for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the LORD as the waters cover the sea."* (Isaiah 11:9 NIV)

PURPOSE OF THIS POLICY

The purpose of Creston's Safe Church Policy is threefold: First, it is to ensure the physical, emotional, and spiritual wellbeing of each person in our church by establishing policies and procedures for conduct. Second, Creston will ensure enforcement of these policies with accountability through education, reporting, and annually reviewing these policies and its performances. Third, Creston will report any allegations/violations immediately to law enforcement and then to its Safe Church Team.

While policy is meant to assure a safe church experience for everybody, this policy is especially intended for the safety of minors and vulnerable adults.

DEFINITIONS

General notes on all types of abuse:

“Intent” has NO bearing on whether or not the act was abusive, for one can abuse another without “intending” to abuse another. If the act was NOT accidental, intent has no bearing.

The following forms of abuse can occur in ANY situation; there is no circumstance that is immune to any of the following abuse.

Abuse of power The Abuse of Power report to Synod 2019 stated, "The term abuse of power is often defined as 'misusing power to harm another person, or using power and influence for personal gain at the expense of another person'" (page 5). Power can be used to harm another person intentionally or through ignorance, subtly or overtly. Often, but not always, to advance one's own desires without regard for the needs or desires of others, always disturbing the flourishing of all people. At the core of all types of abuse are behaviors related to acquiring, maintaining, and misusing power and control. The same power dynamics show up in all types of abuse, whether it be sexual abuse, physical abuse, emotional abuse, or spiritual abuse.

Physical abuse is any non-accidental human act resulting in physical pain or injury to a person - whether or not it results in physical marks. Physically abusive behavior ranges from (but is by no means limited to): slapping, pushing, shoving, punching, kicking, and biting to more severe forms like choking, 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. Physical abuse can be both a single event or a pattern of behavior. Furthermore, whether or not the physical abuse was a single event or a repetitive pattern of behavior bears no relevance on if the event was “abusive” or not. A (consistent) pattern or multiple instances is/are NOT necessary for the physical abuse to be considered “abuse.”

Physical neglect is a form of abuse. This abuse can also be the unintentional or intentional withholding of care, and not just intentional “giving of harm.” Physical neglect is when the responsible caregiver(s) do(es) not meet the physical needs of the dependent(s). Physical neglect interferes with or prevents a minor's or vulnerable adult's normal physical, emotional, and spiritual development.

Sexual abuse is forced or coerced exploitation for sexual intimacy, sexual stimulation, or sexual gratification of another person. Sexual abuse of a minor or vulnerable adult can refer to taking advantage of a minor or vulnerable adult 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 (but is not limited to):

1. Exposing one's self
2. Displaying pornographic material
3. Photo or video recording a child for pornographic materials
4. Obscene electronic communications: telephone calls, emails, texts, social media, etc.

5. “Peeping” or hidden recording devices, regardless of whether or not the recording device is in a bathroom or changing room.
6. Masturbation/self-pleasuring in a minor’s physical or virtual presence
7. ANY Requests to engage in virtual sexual activity

Examples of sexual abuse involving physical contact include (but are NOT limited to):

1. Fondling of any body parts, but specifically the breasts, buttocks, or genitalia;
2. Intercourse, oral and anal sex.
3. Any unwanted/unwelcome physical contact has potential to be considered sexual abuse.

The above lists are also considered abuse for anyone 18 and above if they do not give consent.

Emotional abuse is attempting to control a person’s life through words, threats, neglect, and fear; destroying a person’s self-worth through harassment, threats, and deprivation. Emotional abuse weakens a person’s mental and physical ability to resist, isolates contacts/connection with others, and causes a gradual loss of self-esteem—all of which reinforce a sense of helplessness and dependence on the abuser. Furthermore, emotional abuse can occur alongside other forms of abuse and/or be collateral abuse.

Spiritual abuse and emotional abuse have much in common, but spiritual abuse bears a particularly sinister twist, as principles and maxims of faith are wielded as weapons of command and control, and faith leaders abuse their power for the sake of feeding their own unmet emotional needs. The victim feels just as perplexed and confused as one who has experienced emotional abuse but experiences it from a seemingly more authoritative source—a holy source (description from VanVonderen and Johnson).

Financial abuse occurs when one person or group exploits the labor, resources, or trust of others without concern for the well-being of the other. A common form of financial abuse is for one party to deny another party reasonable access to (shared) finances. Furthermore, this type of financial abuse is most common in committed relationships, but can happen in other situations as well.

Systemic abuse Some abuse takes place between two individuals (i.e., between a perpetrator and a victim). But when abuse is supported by a larger group, or abuse is hidden, or social conditions make abuse more likely, or victims are not taken seriously, we speak of systemic abuse—abuse supported or perpetuated by a social system.

Minor (“child”) A minor is defined as anyone 18 years old and younger.

Vulnerable adult A vulnerable adult generally refers to one who is unable to protect themselves against significant harm or exploitation. It is important to note that this does not necessarily mean that the adult lacks competency. To be classified as vulnerable, the adult's circumstances must be unable to be altered or improved by the adult's own individual actions without direct assistance.

POSITIONS IMPACTED BY POLICY

Any individual on Council, staff, or who is a volunteer engaging with minors or vulnerable adults within the Creston Church community is accountable to this policy. In addition, this policy is the standard for all attendees.

GENERAL POLICY GUIDELINES

A. GENERAL SCREENING

Anyone participating in nursery care, youth group, safety advocate, or children's activities or serving on council or living in the Nizhoni house will be required to complete a volunteer application, sign a policy agreement, submit references, and submit a background security check. References are checked once at the beginning of a volunteer, staff, or council member's service. Background checks are run at the beginning of a volunteer's service and every year continuing. Background checks include a criminal history report through the State of Michigan (iCHAT), Michigan Department of Health and Human Services (MDHHS) central registry clearance for abuse and neglect, and a national criminal check. The ICHAT and MDHHS will be run every year, the national criminal check will be run at the beginning of a volunteer's service. Until a clear background check is completed, volunteers will not be able to work with children but will be encouraged to volunteer in other parts of the church life.

Anyone who has not been a professing member of Creston Church for more than a year may be subject to additional scrutiny. One suitable substitute will be the endorsement of the council or abuse prevention task force of their home church of which they were or are a member of for more than a year.

B. TRAINING

Annual training will be offered on some aspect of abuse, e.g. reporting, awareness of the signs, confronting abusers, dynamics of abuse, biblically healthy relationships. Everyone working with minors will be required to attend an annual training, as well as council members, shepherding elders, Nizhoni residents and safety advocates. If they are unable to attend, the Ministry Director will follow up with them with the required information.

A safe environment curriculum or other teaching on respect, diversity, etc. will also be used to aid the children and youth in creating a safe environment.

C. REPORTING

All clergy are considered mandated reporters by law. In addition to clergy, Creston Church considers all members and attendees mandated reporters to ensure the safety of all who are within the church community.

All allegations of abuse or neglect pertaining to minors and vulnerable adults will be reported to Centralized Intake with the State of Michigan at 1-855-444-3911. For allegations pertaining to minors, the MDHHS form 3200 (located online) will be completed and submitted to Centralized Intake within 24 hours. A report will be on file at the church that an allegation was made.

Allegations of abuse or neglect involving volunteers or individuals who are in positions of leadership within the church will result in immediate and temporary suspension without prejudice until the allegations can be substantiated or disproved by civil law enforcement. Civil law enforcement must always be contacted first, before Creston does anything else. *For situations of suspected domestic abuse please see our separate domestic abuse policy.*

RESIGNATION UNDER ALLEGATIONS/SUSPICION POLICY

No church leader may resign in order to avoid investigation and/or punishment of abuse allegations. Even if a church leader resigns from an official position, an investigation will still be conducted. Leaving office does not mean avoiding civil investigation and consequences.

D. RESPONDING TO A REPORT

After a report has been made to civil law enforcement, then a temporary Safe Church Team shall be formed composed of the pastor or an elder, a member of the safe church team, and the Ministry Director. In the event that one of these adults is directly involved in the situation, another member of Council (preferably an elder) will take their place. This team will then take the proper steps to address the situation following the Responding to Abuse Toolkit on the CRCNA website

<https://network.crcna.org/safe-church/responding-abuse-toolkit-churches>

E. CONFIDENTIALITY

Minors or a vulnerable adult: Abuse allegations by a minor or vulnerable adult are not confidential communications and they will be reported to civil law enforcement. Then the allegations may be reported to the elders *after* civil authorities are notified.

Non-vulnerable adults: Abuse allegations by an adult concerning non-vulnerable adults of abuse should have their privacy respected and the elders should not be notified without the adult's consent – even if the alleged offender is a member of the congregation. Finally, if someone is unsure if something should remain confidential, that person may seek counsel from a pastor, elder, or law enforcement for advice.

F. TRANSPORTATION

Ordinarily, two unrelated adults will be present in the front of the vehicle when transporting a minor in the course of Church-sponsored programs. In the event that two unrelated adults are not present, at least two of the following procedures must be in place:

- A. At least two minors are present with the driver.
- B. Minors are seated in the back seats of the vehicle.
- C. Drivers must notify the parent or guardian immediately prior to leaving with the estimated arrival time and who is present in the vehicle. The driver must then notify a parent or guardian that they have arrived at the location. Same process should be followed for a return trip. (A text message, voicemail or answering machine is acceptable.)

Pertaining to Youth Ministry: Transportation to and from regular youth meetings is not part of church or youth group activities. Parents or guardians are responsible for arranging this

transportation. If a volunteer/staff person transports a minor at the parent's request, this should be recognized as informal contact and not part of the church program. The exception to this is in the case of special events, trips, or circumstances where staff have pre-arranged drop-off/pick-up times with parents or guardians. In this case, the above policies will apply.

G. DOORS

All classroom and nursery doors shall contain a window. There shall be no locks on any of these doors.

H. RATIOS

The following ratios of leader: minor shall always be followed:

Infants to 30 months 1:4

30 months to 3 years 1:8

3-4 years 1:10

4-5 years 1:12

6-12 years 1:18

13-17 years of age 1:30

I. LIVE STREAMING

All live stream worship services and events will contain a disclosure statement and congregational guidelines for addressing the congregation on live stream and in-person.

Written consents for live stream events are to be located to the rear of the sanctuary.

Policy Guidelines for Specific Groups

A. YOUTH GROUPS

SUPERVISION

Youth ministry functions shall occur under the supervision of more than one youth leader unless in a public space or with other adults nearby (see one-to-one section).

Release forms, parental consent forms, and medical insurance forms must be completed before any activities away from the church facility, out of town, or overnight and must be confidentially kept on site by the Ministry Director or designated youth leader during these activities.

ONE-TO-ONE

A youth leader shall not meet privately with a youth ministry student without first receiving the written consent of the parents (text or email is acceptable). Meetings will take place during daytime or evening hours with others present in a public place e.g. a restaurant, public or school library, etc. Meetings shall never take place in a car, office, or a home alone. Most importantly, regardless of where a one-to-one meeting takes place, said meeting will always be within visual range of others.

MEDICAL

If a minor is injured or needs medical attention:

1. If the injury is severe, paramedics/EMT will be called and parent/guardian immediately after.
2. If the injury is minor, the injury will be treated by the Ministry Director or volunteer youth leader only and parents must be notified within 6 hours.

The Ministry Director should be notified of any injuries and should fill out an incident report.

DATING

It is never appropriate for a youth leader and a youth ministry student to date each other.

BATHROOM POLICY

Leaders should never be alone in the bathroom with a minor. Students should not require assistance in the bathroom, but if an emergency situation arises, the bathroom door may be propped open with other leaders present to assist. A Parent or legal guardian must be notified immediately if such a need has arisen.

B. CHILDREN'S PROGRAMS

SUPERVISION

There will be at least two leaders to oversee all group (more than one minor) activities. One leader may supervise classroom time provided the door is left open and there are other adults within 20 feet.

Leaders will stay with participants until parent, guardian or authorized transporters pick them up or they are delivered back to their parents or guardians.

Leaders will inform the Ministry Director of activities that occur away from the church facility, out of town, or overnight. Release forms, parental consent forms, and medical insurance forms must be completed before these activities take place.

ONE-TO-ONE

A leader shall not meet privately with a minor before receiving the written consent of the parent(s). Meetings will take place during daytime or evening hours with others present in a public place e.g. a restaurant, public or school library, etc. Meetings shall never take place in a car, office or a home alone. Most importantly, regardless of where a one-to-one meeting takes place, said meeting will always be within visual range of others.

MEDICAL

If a minor is injured or needs medical attention:

3. If the injury is severe, paramedics/EMT will be called and parent/guardian immediately after.
4. If the injury is minor, the injury will be treated only by his/her designated helper and parents must be notified within 6 hours.

The Ministry Director should be notified of any injuries and should fill out an incident report.

BATHROOM POLICY

If a minor needs to use the bathroom, the adult leader will first check the bathroom to make sure there are no other adults present before letting the minor in. The leader will stay outside of the bathroom door in the hallway, until the minor is finished. Please use the rule of three. Some examples of a correct rule of three:

1. One leader and two minors go to the bathroom
2. One leader and the whole class if no helper is present go to the bathroom
3. Student goes to the bathroom by themselves if you are within 20 feet of bathroom

In the unlikely event that they need assistance, the door can be propped open, and the parent will be called. A leader will never be in the bathroom alone with a minor and never in a stall. It is acceptable to open the bathroom door, while standing in the hallway if the situation necessitates it (i.e. they are taking a very long time and you need to ask if they are ok).

C. NURSERY ATTENDANTS

There will be 2 nursery attendants for the morning service, one of whom is an adult (18+). There will be at least one adult volunteer for any other event taking place in the church basement and nursery childcare is needed provided the adults are meeting downstairs right outside the door and there is a window in the door for anyone to observe. If there are more than four minors present per attendant, additional attendants will be summoned to assist.

The youngest age for a second assigned helper to assist will be fourteen years old. Anyone younger wanting to help will be taken on a case to case basis and only as a third helper.

SIGNING IN AND OUT

Nursery shall have a check in and check out sheet posted by the entrance. A parent or custodial adult is expected to sign in and sign out. They should also receive the name tag with their child's name which they will return at the end of the service to retrieve their child. Visitors will be given similar tags to be filled out and all children will have their own name tag clipped to the back of their shirt with safety information on it, including food allergies or preferences.

If the situation must be handled before the parent or custodial adult arrives, the adult attendant will care for the situation and write the events of what happened on the back of the sign in/sign out sheet as a written record.

BATHROOM AND DIAPERING

Only parents/custodial adults may diaper or take their child to the bathroom. For minors who require special assistance, the adult should wait until the parent arrives, with the bathroom door propped open. The Safety Advocate will be paged to summon the parent or guardian of the minor needing attention. If a Safety Advocate is not scheduled, the nursery assistant will be sent upstairs as quickly as possible to summon the parent or guardian and return to the nursery immediately. The adult will also first check to make sure there are no other adults in the bathroom.

For minors who do not require assistance in the bathroom, the adult attendant must remain outside the bathroom.

MEDICAL

Parents/custodial adults will be notified if medical assistance is needed.

PEOPLE PRESENT IN THE NURSERY

Only scheduled adult attendants and helpers may be in the nursery room(s) during the service. Parents will be allowed to sit with their child in the nursery until they are comfortable, but attendants will be asked to be vigilant in watching their behavior and the parent can be asked to leave at any point if they have not undergone a background check. It is preferable that they sit in a chair along the wall or stand at the door instead of interacting with the other children. Or they may use the non-staffed Family Room next door if they prefer to stay with their child.

E. PASTOR-OFFICE BEARER/COUNSELEE COUNSELING

The pastor should confine counseling appointments to normal daytime hours when others are present. The pastor shall schedule evening appointments only if others are in the building, if counseling more than one person together, or if another office bearer will attend the evening appointment.

ONE-TO-ONE WITH MINORS

The pastor/office bearer shall not meet privately with a minor without first receiving the written consent of the parents. A pastor/office bearer will meet with a minor during daytime hours, evening hours if others are present, and in a public place, e.g. McDonalds, public or school library, etc. A pastor/office bearer may not transport a minor without another adult present in the vehicle. Most importantly, regardless of where a one-to-one meeting takes place, said meeting will always be within visual range of others.

TRUST

Pastor/office bearers should carefully consider their boundaries in relationship to the congregation and to each other. Verbal abuse, emotional abuse, harassment, and sexual exploitation and abuse are violations of the trust imparted to leaders in their office.

POSSIBLE SIGNS OF ABUSE & NEGLECT

NOTE: While the below symptoms are most common to the listed **specific** age group, all the **symptoms** listed below can happen at ANY AGE.

In Nursery Children

1. Burns, blisters, black and blue marks, and other unexplained injuries
2. Excessive crying during diaper change
3. Failure to show typical signs of growth and development

In Preschool Children

1. Regression to an earlier stage of developmental behavior, i.e. thumb sucking, baby talk,

- cuddling a blanket
- 2. Changes in social behavior, such as withdrawal, fear, excessive crying, aggressive behavior, etc.
- 3. Problems with urine and bowel control
- 4. Refusal to play with a favorite toy or to participate in a favorite activity, or with a previously favorite person
- 5. Explicit sexual language or statements that would indicate the child is involved in behavior beyond what is age-appropriate
- 6. Attempting sexual behavior with other children or adults
- 7. Burns, blisters, black and blue marks, or other unexplained injuries

In School Age Children

- 1. Frequent requests to go to the restroom; loss of bladder or bowel control
- 2. Multiple incidents of unexplained injuries
- 3. Poor concentration in class, or daydreaming
- 4. Signs of low self-esteem, including over-achieving and perfectionism
- 5. Physical self-injury
- 6. Masturbation
- 7. Anger and hostility directed toward others, and sometimes acted out on toys and other physical objects
- 8. Drawings, which reveal details of sexual activities and nude adults
- 9. Attempted sexual behavior with other children or adults
- 10. Sexually explicit language beyond what a child should know
- 11. Behavior such as lying, stealing, hoarding food, toys or other objects.
- 12. Frequent absences from school
- 13. Blackouts in which the child has a period of his/her life that he/she cannot recall or has a fuzzy memory of
- 14. Sudden avoidance of a person, specifically parents

In Adolescents

- 1. Unexplained physical injuries, chronic physical complaints
- 2. Eating disorders such as anorexia, bulimia, sudden and unexplained change in weight and appetite
- 3. Over or underachieving in school
- 4. Difficulty in being emotionally supportive of others, or difficulty in interacting with other teenagers
- 5. Withdrawal from physical contact and avoidance of all touch
- 6. Tendency to behave in a way that sets others up to reject them or abandon them, and perpetuate a situation of re-victimization
- 7. Sexually active; seductive around others
- 8. Fear and distrust of authority figures sometimes manifested as arson, stealing, cruelty to animals, chemical abuse, etc.
- 9. Issues with law enforcement
- 10. Depression and suicidal ideation

11. Unexplained/irrational fears, anxiety and worries
12. Refusal to attend to basic hygiene or normal everyday habits and routines
13. Sudden avoidance of a person, specifically parents
14. Frequent absences from school