



Bethel Church – Safe Church Policy

[Updated October 2021]

This safe church policy and ministry procedures aim at reducing Bethel Church's risk of child sexual abuse within its ministries.

Adults who minister with children/youth are responsible for fostering a nurturing environment wherein children/youth are rooted in the love and acceptance of Jesus Christ and ignited by the Holy Spirit to be growing in and sharing their faith. Foundational to this environmental nurture is the established trust between adult and children/youth. In various nurturing environments children/youth learn to trust adults, following them faithfully and sometimes unquestionably. Because of this trust level, adults who minister with children/youth must always act with integrity and trustworthiness.

The staff, leaders, teachers, or volunteers in a position representing Bethel Church are required to report any suspected or alleged incidence of abuse to the Pastor. It is not the responsibility of the reporting person to substantiate the alleged abuse, but only to report it to the Pastor. When the alleged victim is a minor child the reporting person will be encouraged to report this to the local Children's Protective Service agency and/or the local law enforcement department. Michigan state law requires the Pastor to report all alleged abuse cases involving minor children to Children's Protective Services and Law Enforcement Agencies. Maintaining records of reported incidents will be left to the discretion of the Administrative Team, but if they are kept they must be secure and confidential.

In order to assure protection for children and prevent abuse from happening, all staff, leaders, teachers and volunteers who work with children/youth will be required to read the Safe Church Policy and fill out the volunteer form every year. Background checks are required every 2 years for those 18 and older.

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Prevention Guidelines

Parents are encouraged to take their child to the bathroom before Nursery, Church School or Children's Worship begins.

If it is not possible to have two adult leaders/volunteers serving in the classroom then the **open door policy** is to be followed by teachers and other staff. This means that the classroom door will remain open at all times. A window in a closed door will also meet this requirement.

Nursery Procedures (during worship & WNAB)

- Parent(s) dropping off children must sign-in with their name, cell phone number, and any other information. Children will be assigned a colored card, which the parent(s) will take with them to worship and return when picking up their child/children. The nursery attendant will put a matching color sticker on the child so the parent picks up the correct child. In order to pick up their child/children from nursery, they will need to return the colored card.
- A minimum of two people are required to be in nursery every worship service or event where nursery is offered. If possible, there should be three people attending the nursery and all three attendants will not be members of the same family. Husband and wife will not staff the nursery at the same time.
- All nursery attendants will be approved by the Administrative Team.
- If a child needs a diaper change or needs to use the bathroom, the parent(s) will be contacted via text message.
- Children will stay in the nursery until picked up by parents or those designated with the correct color card.
- Anyone not following the rules stated must be reported to the Pastor.
- The toys will be sprayed with sanitizer after the nursery has been used and the nursery will be cleaned weekly by the custodians.

Church School, Children's Worship, Cadets, GEMS & Youth Group Procedures

- All leaders must fill out the volunteer form and read the policy each year.
- Any one-on-one (student with teacher/leader) activities will require written approval of the parent.
- A Bethel Ministries Permission slip must be filled out and signed by each ministry member in order for a leader to transport youth to/from a church activity.
- Anyone not following the rules stated must be reported to the Pastor.

Great Adventure, VBS and Kids Hope Procedures

- All members involved in these ministries must fill out the volunteer form and read the policy each year.

Procedures for Reporting Suspected Abuse

Removal or suspension of alleged offenders serving in some capacity within the church will follow the listed guidelines.

When the allegation is made of abuse, the alleged offender must be informed of these allegations and must be suspended from participating in all service roles in the church until an investigation is done by the proper authorities. (Children's Protective Services and/or local law enforcement agencies.)

If the allegations are found to be false the censure on service will be lifted. The elders will continue to work with the party who made the allegations. If the allegations are true the offender must continue under censure and be dealt with by the pastoral elders per Church Order articles 78 through 84. That in addition to the following be done if the pastor is the alleged offender (accused): The church visitors and the Pastor-Church Relations or Regional pastor shall be notified immediately.

Suspension of an office bearer means, in the case of the pastor, that his salary and housing continue while he is under suspension. The church visitors shall report in executive session to the next meeting of classis. The alleged offending party and the council shall seek to keep the incident confidential. If/when suspension is lifted; the lifting of suspension shall be made known to the church visitors, to the director of Pastor-Church Relations or Regional Pastor, and to an executive session of classis. The council shall encourage both parties to seek professional counseling.

Reinstatement of a healed offender:

The ex-offender must request reinstatement into the church and admit sorrow for his sin per Church Order articles 81 and 84. The healed offender must submit psychologist or therapists' statement of visitation and progress in treatment on a regular basis to the Pastor or his designee. A healed offender will not be placed in a volunteer position, which places him at risk.

To protect staff (paid and volunteer) and assure accountability of ministry leaders, any concerns of the staff must be reported to the Pastor.

Indicators of Abuse

A growing national concern both in society and in the church is the betrayal of children and youth's trust in adults through abuse. Adults must always guard against and caution themselves against abusing children and youth verbally, physically, and sexually. While our church understands some of the factors that lead to abuse, we believe abuse is never excusable. (Abuse does not disqualify adults from involvement in other ministries within the church. We stand in need of forgiveness and restoration.)

KNOWLEDGE and PREVENTION. These are two key words regarding sexual abuse in the church.

KNOWLEDGE of sexual abuse often begins with acknowledgment. The Christian community should recognize that in over 80% of sexual abuse cases, the perpetrator is a close friend or family member. Nation wide attention is being focused on sexual abuse of children and youth by church volunteers and staff. The church can no longer deny that sexual abuse exists within its midst.

The second critical word is PREVENTION. Acknowledging that church workers too may be perpetrators of sexual abuse, the church must take steps to prevent such abuse. Thinking that abuse will never happen in our church breeds the type of environment where abuse could be even more likely to happen. Something can be done to reduce the risk of abuse in our church.

KNOWLEDGE and PREVENTION are not only foundational for a safe environment for children and youth; they are beneficial for those susceptible to practicing abuse.

What is sexual abuse?

A simple, working definition of sexual abuse is: Any sexual activity with a child (*Reducing the Sexual Risk of Child Sexual Abuse in Your Church*, p. 13). Sexual abuse occurs when the perpetrator takes advantage of a child's age, vulnerability, and powerlessness. The perpetrator is fully responsible for these actions. Sexual abuse occurs in two categories: 1) touching: fondling, penetration, intercourse, rape; 2) non touching: comments, pornography, obscene phone calls, exhibitionism. The consequences in the life of the abused are often deep and long lasting. Even a thoughtless momentary act of sexual abuse can result in children and youth experiencing abnormal fears, depression, low self-esteem, suicidal tendencies, substance abuse, sexual dysfunctions.

What are the indicators of sexual abuse?

Parents, church volunteers and staff should be alert to the signs of sexual abuse. Awareness can intercept sexual advances at an early stage as well as lead to the eventual apprehension of the perpetrator.

The following may be indicators of sexual abuse.

One indicator alone could be a sign but does not necessarily indicate sexual abuse. These indicators taken together give reasonable cause that sexual abuse may be taking place.

- lacerations and bruises
- nightmares
- irritation, pain, or injury to the genital area
- difficulty with urination
- discomfort when sitting
- torn or bloody underclothing
- venereal disease

Behavioral signs may include:

- anxiety when approaching church or nursery area
- nervous or hostile behavior toward adults
- sexual self-consciousness
- "acting out" of sexual behavior
- withdrawal from church activities and friends

Verbal signs may include the following statements:

- I don't like (a particular church worker).
- (A church worker) does things to me when we're alone.
- I don't like to be alone with a (church worker).
- (A church worker) fooled around with me.

(Reducing the Risk of Child Sexual Abuse in Your Church, p. 16)

Indicators of physical abuse:

- Unexplained lacerations, bruises & welts (especially if in several locations, different stages of healing, or if common after absences or vacations).
- Unexplained burns (such as cigarette, or patterned burns as left by electric burners or irons, particularly in locations atypical to accidental exposures to objects).
- Unexplained fractures (including nose and skull and multiple or spiral fractures, or repeated breaks).
- Fear of parents or going home from school at the end of the day.
- Wariness of adult contacts or inquires.

Indicators of mental abuse:

- Lags in physical development
- Speech disorders
- Failure to thrive
- Habit disorders (such as sucking, biting, or rocking)
- Neurotic reactions (such as hysteria, obsession, phobias)
- Extreme behaviors (passive or aggressive in nature)
- Attempted suicides

Indicators of neglect:

- Consistent hunger, poor hygiene, constant fatigue or inappropriate clothing
- Consistent lack of supervision (especially in dangerous activities or for long periods of time)
- Unattended or untreated physical problems or medical needs
- Alcohol or drug abuse
- Abandonment

When attempting to evaluate whether reasonable cause exists to suspect abuse or neglect, educators should take into account the presence of one or more of these indicators, the number of them present, their severity and the repetitiveness with which they appear. Remember, however, even an isolated occurrence of some of these indicators may trigger the obligation to file a report.