

Guidelines for Safe Congregations: A Montana Synod Sample Policy for Congregations

Role of the Congregation: The Church Council is responsible for the safety and wellbeing of all the congregation, and the supervision of all staff and volunteers. In order to insure safety for all, the Council establishes policies and guidelines. The Council, along with the Pastor, is responsible to see that they are carried out.

Role of the Synod: The Synod establishes guidelines for rostered leaders (pastors and deacons). Any infraction by a rostered leader must be reported to the Bishop of the Montana Synod, who is responsible for the discipline of rostered leaders.

The Pastor: (This includes all rostered leaders—pastors, deacons (formerly Associates in Ministry and Diaconal Ministers and Deaconesses) and Synodically Authorized Ministers.

The Montana Synod of the ELCA has a policy regarding sexual misconduct by ministers. As stated in the introduction to the policy: “The Synod is committed to preventing sexual misconduct within the church and to responding with justice and compassion when such misconduct occurs.” If at any time there is concern about the conduct of the minister, any individual is encouraged to speak with the pastor, notify the president of the church council and inform the bishop’s office (406 453 1461 x201). The Synod’s guidelines are available online at www.montanasynd.org. In the event of a report of misconduct, this congregation will utilize the Synod policy, summarized below.

Summary of Synod Policy (full text is at www.montanasynd.org)

The Montana Synod will not tolerate clergy sexual misconduct. It expects all ministers to attend a boundaries workshop, and to take advantage of additional educational opportunities. It further expects ministers to share appropriate learnings with the congregation. Anyone knowing or suspecting clergy sexual misconduct is asked to contact the Bishop’s office directly (406 453 1461 x201), or ljungling@montanasynd.org. The Bishop’s office will initiate an initial investigation. The information will be assessed and appropriate actions taken. Great effort will be taken to verify the accuracy of allegations, and response will be determined by level of misconduct. Pastoral care and counseling will be provided for individuals involved.

If a minor is involved, Child Protective Services must be informed. This is the law.

Montana: 1-866-820-5437 <http://dphhs.mt.gov/cfsd>

Wyoming: 1-307-777-5536 <http://dfsweb.wyo.gov/social-services/child-protective-services>

The Montana Synod encourages the congregation to adopt additional policies governing staff and volunteers in the congregation.

Education and awareness:

The congregation will provide time and funding for the minister and other leaders to participate regularly in boundaries training. The congregation will also encourage the pastor and staff to maintain a healthy and balanced lifestyle, taking into account all the facets of the Wellness Wheel.

Counseling:

The pastor is encouraged to provide no more than three counseling sessions with anyone, and to refer the person to a professional counselor. The pastor should avoid being alone in an isolated setting with

anyone, including a minor. Installing windows into an office door, leaving the door ajar, or meeting in a more open space is recommended.

Background check:

All who work with youth (clergy, lay staff, volunteers) will undergo a background check for safety. Appropriate screening will be followed in the calling of pastors and other staff.

Lay Staff and Volunteers:

The congregation is responsible for the vetting and behavior of all lay staff and volunteers.

Screening: It is recommended that lay staff and volunteers who work with children be screened appropriately.

Education: It is recommended that lay staff and volunteers participate in boundaries training. Ongoing education in the congregation is helpful in reducing the risk of child abuse and sexual misconduct.

Never alone: Whenever possible, two adults, preferably both genders, if it is a mixed group, should be present with the nursery, Sunday School classes, youth gathering, or other social events. Youth under 18 should not be responsible for the nursery without an adult present. For overnight retreats, it is highly recommended that at least two adults, preferably on-related, accompany the group. A staff person should not meet alone with a minor in an isolated setting.

When there is an accusation: If there is suspicion of sexual misconduct by a staff person or volunteer, the pastor shall visit with the person in question as soon as possible. Depending on the conversation, the pastor may inform the Executive Committee. Information is kept confidential, limited to those who need to know. If there is reasonable cause to believe that the individual in question may continue to pose a risk to the safety of the congregation, these steps serve as a guideline:

When a minor is involved: It must be reported to Child Protective services within 48 hours. This is the law. Adult members of the victims must be notified as soon as possible. See contact numbers for Montana and Wyoming above.

When criminal activity is indicated: civil and criminal proceedings take precedence over church policies.

In non-criminal cases not involving minors: The pastor will meet with the alleged offender as soon as possible to learn his/her story. If the offense is from the past, the pastor must learn what steps had been taken to address the behavior patterns. The pastor will ask permission to make appropriate contacts with previous churches, counselors, law enforcement, etc. If permission is denied, the alleged offender's position would be suspended.

Consultation: The Pastor will consult with legal and other counsel, including the Synod office, to determine the legal implications of the offense, the need for further professional consultation, and who within the congregation needs to be informed.

Disclosure: The pastor should inform all or part of the Church Council promptly. The Church Council may insist that the individual enter into counselling. The individual must sign a release form so that the pastor may be kept informed of the process. Failure to sign such a release or to undertake the counseling will result in the suspension of membership and participation.

Children: When a minor is involved, the pastor or council must contact Child Protective Services. This is the law. See the contact numbers for Montana and Wyoming above. The council will put special measures in place to protect children, including having 2 adults with children whenever possible, prohibition of anyone with a record of sexual assault or any crime against a minor working with children. The safety of children takes the highest priority.

Members and visitors with criminal background: While the church welcomes everybody, safety is a primary concern and takes precedence over privacy. Anyone accused or convicted of a violent offense or an offense against a minor should consult with the pastor. The pastor, in consultation with at least one Council member, should establish guidelines and boundaries for participation. At no time should they be allowed to work with children, even under supervision.

Cyber Safety:

The availability of internet in the congregation opens up the possibility of misuse. This congregation will not allow the viewing of pornography or other inappropriate content on its computers. It is recommended that all publicly available computers be password protected.

Policy Review:

The Council and staff will review the policy at least biannually.

Revised with new bishop email Jan. 2022.

Adopted by the Montana Synod Council, February, 2017, for congregational use.