

**Alexanderwohl Mennonite Church**  
**COVENANT**  
**TO CARE FOR SURVIVORS OF SEXUAL ABUSE**  
**AND SEXUAL OFFENDERS**  
**April 2009**

The Alexanderwohl Mennonite Church, after engaging in a period of study on the topic of sexual abuse with input from professionals in the field and with prayer and discernment of the congregation, adopts this covenant. It is our intent to be the Christian church for both survivors of sexual abuse and offenders. The following Guiding Principles and Covenants for Caregiving Ministry will serve as a roadmap for Alexanderwohl.

**Definitions**

- *Sexual abuse* is any sort of nonconsensual sexual contact, direct or indirect, in which a person who has less power is victimized by a person with greater power. Sexual abuse is a crime.
- An *offender* is a person who has violated another person's sexual boundaries either through direct or indirect contact.
- A *victim\* of sexual abuse* is a person who has experienced a violation of sexual boundaries either through direct or indirect contact. The victim can be a female or male of any age.
- A *survivor\* of sexual abuse* is a person who learns to cope with the abuse, understanding that he/she is not at fault. Being a victim implies a certain powerlessness, whereas a survivor has found the power from within to move toward healing.
- *Secondary victims* may include a spouse or partner, parents, children, siblings, and sometimes extended family of either the victim or offender.
- A *limited access plan* is a written document that sets forth guidelines to protect victims, the congregation and the offender while participating in the life of the church.

\*The terms *victim* and *survivor* may be used interchangeably within this document. We understand that persons who have been sexually abused will have different language preferences to identify themselves, including language other than that given in this document. We recognize that we do not meet everyone's preference.

**I. General Guiding Principles for the Congregation**

1. Sexual abuse brings tremendous suffering to all involved. The congregation can be a place of acknowledgment, process, healing and restoration.
2. Secrecy is a key ingredient of abuse for both survivors and offenders. Within any congregation, there are likely unknown survivors and offenders who have not felt safe enough to disclose their stories.

3. Sexual abuse destroys trust. If and when forgiveness occurs, this does not mean trust is restored. The journey toward developing healthy, trusting relationships is long and difficult.
4. Forgiveness does not end the consequences of sexual abuse for the victim nor does it negate the need for ongoing accountability by the offender.
5. The congregation will create an atmosphere of safety by showing respect to survivors, offenders, and their families. Confidentiality will be respected as much as possible, unless another person is in danger.
6. The congregation is committed to prayerful support for survivors and offenders, known and unknown.
7. The congregation is committed to educating children, youth and adults about healthy sexuality, appropriate boundaries, and the prevention of sexual abuse. Guidance for this component will be given by the Board of Education.
8. The congregation is committed to faithfully and willingly follow the church's policy for protection of children, youth and adults as a means to prevent abuse, respond to abuse, and demonstrate care and respect for survivors and offenders.

## **II. Caregiving Ministry for Survivors**

### **Guiding Principles**

1. A person who has been sexually abused and wishes to share his/her experiences needs someone who can listen compassionately, offer prayerful support, and be trusted with confidentiality.
2. Each survivor of sexual abuse is on his/her own journey of healing. Providing the survivor with a support person or group may be helpful. The survivor must be allowed to direct his/her own recovery process, including decisions regarding a support group and ways in which the church may help.
3. Outside resources may be needed to aid the survivor in the healing process. These resources could include a counselor/psychologist, a medical doctor, law enforcement, etc. The church may need to provide financial help for the survivor so that resources can be utilized.
4. Sexual abuse rarely affects only the primary victim. Support in the form of caregiving may be crucial for secondary victims as well.

### **Covenant**

The congregation covenants to follow the process outlined below for responding to and caring for survivors in our midst:

1. When a victim shares his/her story with a pastor or congregational member, that person will take appropriate action to protect the victim. If safety is an immediate concern, refer to the safe sanctuary policy ("Alexanderwohl Mennonite Church Policy and Procedures for the Protection of Children, Youth and Adults – Action Plan for Handling Complaints).

2. If the survivor requests the assistance of a support person or group, the pastoral team and/or Deacon Board will form this group in consultation with the survivor. It will be the role of the support person or group to:
  - Listen and encourage with compassion;
  - Pray with and for the survivor;
  - Guard confidentiality;
  - Help determine whether outside assistance is necessary or helpful;
  - Empower the survivor to use tools and resources to support his/her unique journey toward healing; and
  - Listen to the survivor's needs regarding reintegration of an offender into congregational life.

The survivor must be allowed to direct his/her own healing process.

3. If needed, the Board of Deacons may provide financial assistance from the Caring Fund to help the survivor utilize outside resources (e.g., counseling, medical care, legal counsel, law enforcement, etc.) to help in the healing process.
4. The pastors and/or Deacon Board may also provide care for the secondary victims associated with the survivor, as needed. One or more congregational members may be asked to serve as their advocate. Financial assistance from the Caring Fund may be provided to uphold the caregiving ministry for families.

### **III. Caregiving Ministry for Offenders**

#### **Guiding Principles**

1. Sexual abusers are as diverse as those who are abused. Viewing all offenders through a single lens is not helpful and hinders the church's ability to respond.
2. Because of the complexity of sexual abuse and the presence of victims, this offense is different from others encountered in the congregation.
3. An offender who truly understands what the offense has done to his/her victim and how his/her presence affects the victim *and* other victims or survivors will not insist on "my rights." This includes the "right" to ask his/her victim for forgiveness because this again puts the offender in a position of power over the victim.
4. The congregation will be encouraged to provide compassion, support and accountability for offenders.
5. An offender who wants to be a part of the congregation will be required to participate in a process of discernment with congregational leadership. Expectations of this process include compliance with legal consequences, willingness to do the work of a treatment plan, and agreement to be accountable to protect the congregation. An accountability support group for the offender is a vital part of this process, including prayerful discernment of the offender's repentance.

6. A plan for involvement in congregational life may be designed with restrictions specific to the offender. A discernment process will be followed to consider whether the offender's presence may act as a trigger to known or unknown victims in the congregation, thus causing re-victimization.
7. If the offender's primary victim or secondary victims attend our congregation, it may be necessary to provide church for the offender in alternative ways off-campus, or direct the offender to seek fellowship in another congregation.
8. The congregation recognizes that an individual who has sexually offended may have family members who need caregiving ministry, and is committed to meet these needs.

## **Covenant**

The congregation covenants to follow the process outlined below, for responding to and caring for sexual offenders.

### **A. For a known offender who is seeking fellowship in our congregation:**

- 1) The offender will be asked to share his/her story with the Board of Deacons (comprised of the deacons and pastoral team).
- 2) The offender will not attend worship or any other church activity while the Board of Deacons studies and discerns the feasibility of this offender being integrated into the life of the congregation. The Board of Deacons will also discern persons to pray for the process.
- 3) An accountability group of 3-4 persons, appointed by the Board of Deacons, will provide support and prayer for the offender during the leadership's time of study and discernment. This group will also provide recommendations to the Board of Deacons regarding the feasibility of integration.
- 4) The Board of Deacons will decide whether to work toward integration.
- 5) If integration is the decided goal, the accountability group will develop a Limited Access Plan for the offender's participation in the life of the congregation.
- 6) The Limited Access Plan will be designed specifically for the offender. It will take into consideration any legal obligations the offender is fulfilling and the recommendations of treatment professionals. The plan will support compliance with treatment programs and set forth limits designed to protect survivors, secondary victims and the offender while participating in congregational life. It may include paths toward healing and restoration for the offender.
- 7) The Limited Access Plan will be approved by the Board of Deacons, submitted to the Church Council for final approval, and then shared with the congregation.
- 8) The offender will agree to follow the guidelines in the Limited Access Plan.

- 9) The accountability group is responsible to:
  - Implement and manage the Limited Access Plan;
  - Provide prayer, care, support and accountability for the offender; and
  - Provide regular reports to the Board of Deacons on how the plan is being followed.
  
- 10) The accountability group may suggest changes to the Limited Access Plan over time (either decreasing or expanding participation). These changes will be discussed and approved by the Board of Deacons, submitted to the Church Council for final approval, and then shared with the congregation.
  
- 11) If the offender has family members who may benefit from caregiving ministry, the Board of Deacons may appoint an advocate or small group to provide support and prayer.
  
- 12) The offender will be excluded from all congregational activities for any of the following reasons:
  - Refusal to participate in the guidelines of this covenant process;
  - Refusal of permission for the pastor to contact the treatment provider and parole officer;
  - Refusal to go for a risk assessment with a qualified therapist;
  - Recommendation by a treatment provider that the individual is at too high a risk for recidivism (repeat offense);
  - Refusal to sign a Limited Access Plan, as outlined by congregational leadership;
  - or
  - Refusal to comply with the requirements of the Limited Access Plan.

The responsibility for exclusion of an offender rests with the Board of Deacons.
  
- 13) If a known offender has not signed a Limited Access Plan, approval for attending special events (e.g., weddings, funerals, etc.) must be granted by the Board of Deacons with arrangements made to promote safety for all.

B. If abuse has occurred by an individual already participating within our congregation:

- 1) There will be an undetermined time of separation of the offender from worship and other congregational activities. Provisions of the safe sanctuary policy (“Alexanderwohl Mennonite Church Policy and Procedures for the Protection of Children, Youth and Adults”) would be followed, as applicable.
  
- 2) Study and discernment will begin regarding the feasibility of re-integrating the offender into the life of the congregation. The process outlined in “A” above will be followed.
  
- 3) It is recognized that, if the offender’s primary or secondary victims are also within our congregation, the congregation may provide the offender with alternate ways of experiencing church separate from corporate worship and church activities, or direct the offender to seek fellowship with another congregation.

**Sources:**

Alexanderwohl Mennonite Church Policy and Procedures for the Protection of Children, Youth and Adults (adopted August 2004, revised September 2007).

Haffner, Rev. Debra W. (2005). A Time to Heal: Protecting Children and Ministering to Sex Offenders. Fort Wayne, IN: LifeQuest.

Mika, Harry and Zehr, Howard (2002). The Little Book of Restorative Justice. Intercourse, PA: Good Books.

Eric Massanari, Pastor, Shalom Mennonite Church, Newton, Kansas, presentation to congregation on October 5, 2008.

Paul Unruh, LCSW, Prairie View Inc., Newton, Kansas, presentations to congregation on September 7 and 14, 2008.

Robert Yutzy, Coordinator of Congregational Ministries, Kansas Institute for Peace and Conflict Resolution (KIPCOR), Bethel College, North Newton, Kansas.

***NOTE: This document may be used as a resource for congregations working on the issue of sexual abuse. It may not be used as a template for others, because every church must go through its own process and claim the outcome. Questions may be directed to the Alexanderwohl Mennonite Church Office, 620-367-8192.***