CONGREGATIONAL SEXUAL ABUSE POLICY

The Church of God in Christ, Mennonite, does not tolerate childhood sexual abuse or misconduct in any form, and believes that all civil laws must be obeyed. This criminal activity is defined by the Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act (CAPTA) which is a U.S. federal law enacted in 1974, with numerous subsequent amendments. We also abide by child abuse statutes as defined by individual states and provinces. We confirm our commitment to comply with these laws, and believe that sexual abuse is sin.

Childhood sexual abuse is herein defined as any sexual activity attempted or involved, or sexual contact with a person who is a minor (under 18 years). Physical assault, sexual battery, molestation, statutory rape, or any attempt to commit such acts is considered child abuse. Sexual abuse includes sexual activity with someone whose consent is not or cannot be given.

We will teach and follow the mandatory reporting laws as defined by CAPTA. All civil laws as defined in national, state, and provincial statutes must be followed. Reporting of these criminal acts must be handled according to civil law. We will cooperate with civil authorities where abuse has occurred, and will work to insure that it ceases and does not happen again. The reporting of these acts to church clergy and civil authorities should be done at the same time and must not be ignored.

We commit ourselves to the monitoring of convicted pedophiles and known sexual abusers in our church and school functions. We will work to secure those situations where children could be at risk. We are committed to protecting our children by supervising them properly in our church buildings, school facilities, and settings where they could be alone with an adult. In family settings, we will continue to teach so that abuse will be prevented, and where it is suspected it will be investigated.

We are determined to continue emphasizing the need to provide a safe haven for our children as they mature. We pledge that the continued and enduring safety of our children is our goal as stated in Ephesians 6:4, “To bring them up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord.”

Christian Peace Ministries
Church of God in Christ, Mennonite

Adopted by the General Ministers’ and Deacons’ Council, Church of God in Christ, Mennonite, March 2017

PROCEDURES IN REGARD TO ALLEGATIONS OF SEXUAL ABUSE
United States
Canada

For those in responsible positions in the local congregation, including parents, volunteers, schoolteachers, school board members, other committee members, and ordained ministers and deacons, etc.

1. When someone in the congregation has a complaint of sexual abuse involving a child, youth, or vulnerable adult, it is to be reported to a local minister or deacon. The local minister or deacon will arrange a meeting with the alleged victim/family to investigate.

2. When the evidence of wrongdoing involves a crime as defined by civil law, authorities will be contacted according to state, provincial, or federal statutes. We believe it to be our duty, based on Romans 13, to cooperate with civil authorities to the best of our ability so that the legal, as well as the spiritual, issues of the crime can be addressed.

3. If the investigation reveals no evidence of misconduct, that will be shared and reviewed with the person who brought the complaint, who can then proceed to find rest and closure with the issue. There may be a need for follow-up to confirm peaceful closure.

4. If there is evidence of abuse or misconduct, we pledge ourselves to support the victim in every way we can. This will include spiritual and emotional pastoral care, and to be responsive to any resulting needs of the victim.

5. The local ministry of the church, including the assistance of other church leaders as needed, will deal with the disciplinary actions required, including recess/removal from duties in the congregation or school, presenting the offending member to the congregation for church discipline, or whatever else may be deemed necessary for both the victim and the offender.

6. It is of paramount importance that "all things be done decently and in order" (1 Corinthians 14:40), with charity and respect for all (1 Corinthians 16:14) and to be redemptive toward everyone involved (2 Corinthians 2:6-8, 1 Thessalonians 5:14).

Christian Peace Ministries
Church of God in Christ, Mennonite

Adopted by the General Ministers' and Deacons' Council, Church of God in Christ, Mennonite, March 2017

Protecting our children
and proper reporting of sexual abuse

Guidelines for Congregational Study and Instruction

Introduction

This summary of "Guidelines for Congregational Study and Instruction" is intended to be a resource for local congregations. Be sure the ministry, teachers, every home, and all members who are of age have a copy available to read and study. Additionally, we encourage that every congregation have a meeting of the church members to summarize the concerns in this policy guide, with opportunity to discuss each item of concern. Some congregations may choose to include all members, but it may be most helpful for all married members and single members who are adults or of sufficient maturity to discuss these issues.

The Gospel of Jesus Christ offers hope and remedy. As Bible-believing Christians, we seek answers to life's problems in the Holy Scriptures. "According as His divine power hath given unto us all things that pertains unto life and godliness" (2 Peter 1:3). We believe the Lord equips the church with gifts of discernment to give counsel in all matters of sin, which includes abuse (Eph. 4:1-16). It is our calling and primary concern to deal with the spiritual aspect of human behavior, such as dealing with sin, repentance and forgiveness.

We acknowledge that some aspects of human behavior are addressed on a physical or emotional level. Often there is an overlap of the natural and spiritual, so careful judgment and discernment are needed. For example, a person may have found a necessary experience of God's grace, yet require continued assistance for emotional healing. In dealing with abuse, several principles of utmost importance are: compassionate understanding, gospel love, and prayerful dependence on divine guidance.

What constitutes childhood sexual abuse?

(Discussion may also include other issues of domestic violence, spousal abuse, etc.) We are primarily addressing child sexual abuse in this study, including:

- inappropriate fondling or touching: grabbing inappropriately or molesting by touching the genitals
- the offender exposing nakedness
- forcing the child to sexually stimulate the offender
- acts of copulation: genital, oral, or anal

These acts committed with an under-age child, or with someone who does not or cannot give consent (vulnerable adult), are sins, as well as crimes which, in some jurisdictions, must be reported to proper authorities. It is important that each congregation be familiar with the laws of their country, state, or province to determine when reporting is required.

Emotional damage incurred by child sexual abuse

Some immediate signs of abuse in children:

- an obvious shift from outgoing, fun-loving behavior to being shy and withdrawn
- discomfort or fear of being left alone with a particular adult or older person
- While thumb-sucking and bed-wetting can be normal in children, they typically grow out of

it. If a child suddenly regresses back to thumb-sucking or bed-wetting, it may be a sign of damage.

- provocative sexual behavior, such as imitation of adult sex play or seeking attention with self-exposure
- Recurring nightmares or sleep disturbances may signal a problem.
- running away from home, or drug/alcohol abuse in puberty-age children
- A child may voice subtle clues to a parent or teacher that something is wrong.

An alert parent, teacher, or concerned adult who notices such indications of possible abuse should approach the child confidentially. It is important to know that a child will rarely lie about sexual abuse. When a loving parent or concerned adult questions a child about a potential problem ("Is there something you need/want to tell me?" "Has someone done something to you that bothers you?"), and invites the child to confide in him or her, it is very important to carefully listen. Don't close the child's spirit with responses like, "You don't know what you are talking about," or, "Be quiet about that and don't talk about it," or, "No, no, he would never do such a thing!" Get the story and let the child know that he/she did the right thing to tell you about it. Then, do something about it immediately. Report it to someone who can do something about it. As sinful behavior, it needs to be reported to the ministry of the church. As a crime, it must be reported to child protective services or to the police. You must follow the procedure attached for "Procedures in Regard to Allegations of Sexual Abuse" (see attached).

Some long-term mental and emotional damage

- deep, seething anger against the offender, against men (or women) in general, or against God
- unresolved feelings of guilt: "It's probably all my fault." "I probably deserved it because of my own problems." "Maybe I enjoyed it a little one time." "He said it was my fault because I was so sexy," etc. Such feelings are not truly accountable guilt, but are imagined and self-destructive. Reassuring the emotionally injured is a first step in assisting their healing.
- Confusion about moral right and wrong is often a result, which also often contributes to depression and other emotional disorders.
- Some abused victims resort to promiscuous behavior and other immoralities.
- Some have a fear of or aversion to sexual intimacy, which takes time and understanding by the victim's husband or wife in order to resolve old impressions and effect healing.

When a sexually abused child lives with an unresolved secret through childhood and youth, without being helped, it is harder to help them for several reasons:

- The memories can get covered up with denial and confusion so that it is difficult to draw out the real truth of the abuse.
- The individual can live with morbid memories and seething anger, which can result in an imaginary perception of the abuse beyond what really happened.
- The individual may continue to excuse his own deviant behavior with blame and irresponsible judgments. "Poor me; I'm ruined anyway, so I might as well. . ." "I can't help it that I hate certain people." "I'm mad at the world and determined to get even by taking it out on someone."

Reporting Policy

Sexual abuse as defined by the Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act (CAPTA) is criminal activity by U.S. federal law. State and provincial law also define sexual abuse. In most cases, these reports must be reported to civil authorities in accordance with CAPTA and state and provincial statutes. Each congregation must become familiar with state, provincial, or federal reporting

requirements and exceptions.

Since sexual abuse is a perversion of morality, it is a deeply ingrained evil that will not go away with a mere reproof or reprimand. An offender will invariably continue to abuse, even if discovered, to fulfill his lust. Therefore, a more decisive and conclusive remedy is needed. Unless an offender is brought to adequate shame and reproach for his deviant behavior, he will likely not be able to truly repent.

Furthermore, even with clear repentance, there needs to be ongoing accountability and follow-up to assure continuing victory and healing, as well as the protection of the victim and other children or vulnerable adults. Someone needs to be the acknowledged support person to regularly affirm ongoing victory. Herein lies the importance of reporting abuse.

Any person, whether parent, teacher, or concerned adult, who has reason to believe that a child has been abused, or who observes conditions or circumstances which they believe may reasonably result in a child suffering sexual abuse, must report it, as required by federal, state, provincial or local law. The abuse must be stopped so it cannot continue to harm the victim or involve other victims. Because it is a crime, it must be reported immediately either to civil child protection services or a law enforcement officer (sheriff or police). There may be an investigation and it is important that you cooperate in facilitating their involvement. The best results will be achieved by proper regard for and cooperation with civil authorities. The more everyone cooperates the better it will turn out for those involved.

Remedy and healing

There is no quick-and-easy fix to the damaged emotions of sexual abuse. Even so, there is hope and healing, and the gospel of Jesus Christ is the best foundation of that hope. Note the principles found in these scriptural passages: Matthew 11:28; 2 Peter 1:3-4; Jeremiah 17:14; Isaiah 53:5, 61:1; Psalm 147:3; Malachi 4:2; 2 Chronicles 7:14. Healing usually takes more time and effort than one might expect, but sometimes it can happen remarkably soon. Ideally, the best help and the best path to healing is within the Christian community. However, it is to be acknowledged that when serious trust issues are involved, it may be necessary to enlist the help of professional counselors outside the church. There certainly are situations where trained professionals can provide valuable assistance that the church is limited in giving. Even with professional counselors involved, support of the church community is important. Sometimes, professional counseling may be prescribed by a judge in the legal process. May we all mutually labor for the common goal of helping and healing the hurting and the “heavy laden."

Practical suggestions for helping the abused child

In the general American society, it is estimated that 38% of girls and 10% of boys are sexually molested in their childhood years. In third-world countries it is known to be even worse. A child may be molested by a stranger, an acquaintance, or a family member. If molested by a stranger, it is more easily recognized as a crisis and the child usually gets help sooner.

We should respond quickly and similarly in ANY instance of abuse. Some suggested actions are as follows:

- Reassure the child repeatedly that she/he did the right thing to come to you.
- Reassure the child that the abuse is not her/his fault, and that it is very sinful and wrong of the abuser to do what he did.
- Assure the child that you will immediately do something about it, and that you will make

sure she/he is protected from further abuse. Pray with the child if it seems fitting.

- Call the police or child protective services to report the crime
- Continue to support the child and everyone involved in the child's best interest.
- If no physical force was used in the abuse, the intervention of caring adults and law enforcement can insure minimal trauma to the child, and effect healing rather quickly.
- If appropriate, support and direct the child to professional counseling.

If a child is molested by a stranger

A child molested by a stranger will likely open up to a caring parent, teacher, or trusted adult. It is very important that the adult listen carefully and calmly so the child feels safe opening up. In doing so, the adult can gain more information to allow them to appropriately implement the actions above and to follow the "Procedures in Regard to Allegations of Sexual Abuse" (see attached).

If a child is molested by someone known by the child

By far, most child sexual abuse is committed by someone known to the child. The child is much less likely to disclose the abuse, which often results in continuing damage over a longer period of time. It is important that we realize how important early detection and action is in this circumstance. A caring parent, teacher, or trusted adult can rescue such a child from continuing damage if somehow there is a window opened to get into the child's heart, and to gain their trust. Again, the basic points above are applied to effect immediate help and healing. The important thing is to protect the child from further damage and to insure accountability and help for the abuser before other children are molested. Follow the "Procedures in Regard to Allegations of Sexual Abuse" (see attached).

If a child is molested by a family member (parent, sibling, close relative)

Such children tend to keep quiet about the abuse, and live with feelings of guilt, worthlessness, mistrust of adults, and withdrawal or detachment. Sometimes they tend toward self-destructive behavior. The sooner the abuse is discovered and stopped, the better the recovery. The longer the abuse continues, the more emotional and soul damage is inflicted. Again, if anyone suspects that incestuous abuse is happening there needs to be immediate response to get help for the victim, as well as to bring accountability and help to the perpetrator of the abuse, and to protect other children and vulnerable adults in the congregation. Follow the "Procedures in Regard to Allegations of Sexual Abuse" (see attached).

What are some helpful guidelines in helping adults who were abused as children?

Often those who were abused as children have never talked about it during their childhood or youth, and feel ashamed or even guilty about opening up. However, continuing emotional struggles and difficulties in adult relationships will often bring the person to open up about the past. This opening up is usually little-by-little, like peeling an onion one layer at a time. As the individual opens up the experiences of abuse, the deep feelings of anger, bitterness, mistrust, unforgiving, and depression come to the surface. It is not uncommon for Christian believers, as well as unbelievers, to experience mistrust or hatred toward God. The Christian, of course, will be more reluctant to admit it because he knows he "should not feel this way."

A caring minister or fellow-believer can greatly help in the journey of healing and spiritual growth, including the following principles:

- acknowledging and facing realistically the damage the abuse has inflicted on the soul. Notice

how the psalmist expresses his hurts and feelings to God in Psalm 10, Psalm 44, Psalm 55, and Psalm 69.

- trusting another individual(s) to walk the person through the experience of facing the inward damage, and seeing the need for restoration and healing (Galatians 6:2 and James 5:16)
- believing that God loves and understands each of us unconditionally, and cares about the consequences of each and every one of our experiences (John 3:16-17, Psalm 103:1-14, Psalm 86:5)
- accepting God's forgiveness for his/her own unholy reactions and feelings of anger, unforgiving, etc. (Psalm 103:10-12, I John 1:9)
- appreciating the wisdom in and inward healing experienced by granting forgiveness to the abuser. Remember that to forgive the hurt inflicted upon the victim is only her/his part. It is God who forgives sin. When we forgive, we are not absolving the offender's actions or sins. To forgive over and over again when feelings of hurt and injury recur is surely included in Jesus' admonition to forgive not only once, but seventy times seven (Matthew 18:21-22, Ephesians 4:32).

Some practical suggestions for helping the abuser

The majority of sex offenders were themselves victims of abuse in their childhood. Understanding the offender's own history can be helpful in assisting in his recovery. Of course, that in no way excuses his own assaulting behavior. We need to be aware of these patterns of human depravity (the Bible uses the word *iniquity* in this sense many times) to see the importance of providing help and healing for victims of child sexual abuse. We must break the cycle of abusive behavior that is easily passed from one generation to another. Since the vast majority of offenders are male, we will address the issue from "his" perspective. We are not ignoring the fact that sometimes females also become abusers.

Some points to remember about teenage offenders

Many child sexual offenders are teenage boys. Sometimes this is minimized or overlooked with the old adage, "boys will be boys." Not only is it sinful and damaging for teenagers to assault innocent children, but such offenders are likely to continue in their deviant lust as adults. It is helpful to note that childhood occurrences of sexual exposure and experimenting between boys and girls of nearly the same age do not normally result in emotional damage. However, experience has taught that sexual exposure and assaulting behavior also occurs where there is significant difference in age, or disparity in mental or physical ability, and often results in damage to the younger, weaker, or infirm child, even if perpetrated by another underage child. That is why, where these circumstances are involved, it is not only sinful but usually also defined as criminal conduct. A teenager may assault a peer or abuse a younger child, and the assault may be violent or manipulative. Sometimes, a teenaged babysitter will take advantage of younger children, and assault them sexually. Sexual abuse can happen in any home, but it is much more likely to occur in dysfunctional families where healthy family relationships are lacking, and where there is a pattern of unresolved conflicts and negative attitudes. It can hardly be overemphasized how much safer our children are when we experience loving relationships and good values of mutual respect, modesty, contentment, and compassion towards younger, weaker, or vulnerable people in our lives, etc.

Responding to an offender

Ministers, parents, or caring adults may find themselves in a situation where they can intervene in the

life of an offender. The offender may come for help himself with a guilty conscience or as a result of being caught, or someone else in the family may come seeking to get help for him. Here are some guidelines to remember:

- The sex offender will seldom tell all the truth about his behavior. He will minimize, deny, or lie about the worst of it. A child molester is likely to make statements like, "Nothing really serious happened." “Don't believe that girl's story; she's a liar.” "I was just beside myself when it happened, so I really don't remember a thing that happened.” (high on drugs, or drunk, etc.)
- The sex offender may express no remorseful feelings or even seem to feel guilty. He is in denial about the reality of what he has done.
- He will usually be more concerned about the trouble and consequences of being caught than the trouble and consequences he has inflicted. That is why, by confiding in you, he is also likely seeking your support as a character witness.
- Sex offenders are usually repeat offenders. Until real help and deliverance happens, they will continue to abuse even if they appear to be sorry.

When a minister, parent, teacher, or caring adult has become aware of an abusive situation, there needs to be immediate response. This includes reporting to appropriate authorities, both in the church and to civil authorities, as soon as possible. The abuse must be stopped, first of all. The sooner the abused child and the abuser can get help, the better.

When an offender seeks the help of a minister in confidence, there are a number of things to consider. In many states in the U.S. and in all Canadian provinces there is a civil law called “mandatory reporting.” Some states or provinces, however, may impose upon the minister an obligation to keep confidential communications in which a perpetrator confesses sexual abuse to the minister. In some states, there is some provision in the law for a minister in this situation to get the individual the help and treatment he needs without reporting. It is important that the minister seek legal counsel immediately to determine his obligation to report the conduct or to maintain as confidential the confession of a member.

Notwithstanding this circumstance, other members must report the abuse to child protective services or civil law enforcement if state or provincial law requires reporting. Again, the congregational leadership should immediately seek legal counsel in these situations to determine their legal duties.

To effect real repentance and deliverance, the offender needs help to stop minimizing the abuse and be brought to conviction on the grave sinfulness of his behavior and thinking. If he is a church member, he will need to be disciplined by the church community (assuming excommunication, in most cases). This does not pay for his sin, but it brings him to open shame and reproach to enable him to truly repent, and to accept the necessary follow-up or treatment for his continued victory and recovery.

Of course, we should be considerate that an offender may truly be crying for help and is willing to assume full responsibility for his sin. In that case, it is surely in his best interest to turn himself in to authorities. If he is willing to do this, the minster may accompany him. This has proven to be helpful, both for the police and for the offender, in providing the best and most effective treatment for his recovery.

If a minister or fellow brother in the faith can continue to minister to the offender there is much more hope for real change and victory. He will need a lot of support and reassurance, both of love and of principle. It has proven very helpful to have someone assigned as an acknowledged support person to frequently check on victory and progress. However, this help and support to the

perpetrator should never be seen as a substitute for reporting to authorities when the law requires it. The perpetrator may well face criminal punishment despite the congregation's desire to support and assist them. This is the appropriate manner of accountability for all concerned. Be aware that in cases of abuse within a family, the abuser will likely be required to leave the family setting during treatment for the protection of the children.

Another important part of helping the repentant offender to effectively change is to assist him in setting boundaries in his relationships with children. For example, a grandfather successfully recovered from the sin of abuse by repentance in his heart. Then, several boundaries were set; he could no longer hold girls on his lap, swing them on swings, or touch them unless in the company of family.

When a father has abused his daughter, it is important to minister to the mother's needs. She has a crisis to face also, and deserves the help and support of someone(s).

The congregation where an abuse case has surfaced may also benefit from a council meeting to share necessary public information.

Principles of prevention and safety

Prevention is better than cure. "Safety is of the Lord" (Proverbs 21:31). We live in an unsafe world, where evil and harm are increasingly encompassing the Christian and the Christian church. We are promised in the Holy Scriptures the concept of a safe place in the gospel of Jesus Christ. In Jeremiah 32:37-39 we read a beautiful passage: "I will bring them again unto this place, and will cause them to dwell safely; and they shall be my people, and I will be their God; And I will give them one heart, and one way, that they may fear me forever, for the good of them and their children after them." And in Isaiah 32:18, "And my people shall dwell in a peaceable habitation, and in sure dwellings and in quiet resting places." Let us determine that we will embrace and support every aspect of providing a safe place for ourselves and our children. This will include safe buildings and classrooms that can be monitored properly. Any activity that could put our children at risk should be supervised carefully.

- Our own soul safely abides in a relationship with God. (Matthew 11:28-30; Philippians 4:7; Psalm 23; Psalm 91. If our heart is safe, we are a safe refuge for others.
- Our home is a safe place (Psalm 127; Proverbs 22:6,8; Ephesians 6:1-4) where everyone is loved, appreciated, and accepted; where the atmosphere is peaceful and orderly; and where there is nurturing discipline with safe boundaries in relationships, modesty, Internet exposure, and all aspects of technology.
- Our school is a safe place where board members, parents, and teachers are in mutual commitment to maintaining safe standards, and where standards of order and conduct include principles of mutual respect, courtesy, and a wholesome atmosphere.
- The church is a safe place. The church is a healing community, a spiritual and emotional support group promoting sound teaching and preaching about sin and the evils of the world around us. In the church, clear boundaries are established to warn us of the lurking evils of modern technology and the treacherous snares in worldly entertainment, and where safety principles are taught and nurtured, including the issue of abuse.

Miscellaneous points

- That we nurture good interpersonal relationships with our children: father/son, father/daughter, mother/son, mother/daughter
- That we remember that children do not have the skills or mature judgment to be turned loose with the Internet, smart phones, and technology, etc. Therefore, we need to inspire, teach,

warn, set boundaries, and monitor usage.

- Remember that there are indeed evil people (pedophiles) who prey on children. The Internet provides access into our homes that must be filtered, monitored, and watched.
- Children need to be taught vigilance, but we as parents should be careful not to be so overly-concerned that we micromanage them.
- Instruct your children not to give their name, phone number, or e-mail address, etc. to a stranger without consulting you as a parent.
- Check your computer: bookmarks, history, or cache, to see how it is being used.
- Be careful about sleepovers, especially where children of varying ages are included.
- Be sensitive to occasions where boys and girls, particularly of varying ages, are together unsupervised for more than a short time, and where there may be opportunity for inappropriate activity.
- Learn good principles of touching: (a) Good, safe touching is affirming, nurturing, and supportive, and makes one feel accepted, appreciated, and cared about. We all need this kind of touching. It includes a warm handshake, a hug at the right time, and a squeeze on the arm or shoulder that empathizes. (b) Confusing touching: This type of touching makes one feel uncomfortable, causing mixed emotions or confusion. This kind of touching is unfamiliar and may seem imposing. There is a certain touch that is subtly stimulating for the imposer but feels intrusive and confusing to the receiver. (c) Bad, unsafe touching: This touching is scary, hurtful, or exploitative. Someone is deliberately forcing himself on another for his own selfish gratification. The recipient does not want it and feels violated or even repulsed. A sexually motivated "pass" fits this bad touching. An inappropriate caress, poke, squeeze, or pinch is abusive and emotionally damaging

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CONFERENCE SCHOOL COMMITTEE

CHURCH OF GOD IN CHRIST, MENNONITE

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ABUSE POLICY ORIENTATION

A. **Church of God in Christ, Mennonite, abuse policy statements**

The Conference School Committee and the schools of the Church of God in Christ, Mennonite, are in accord with and committed to the practices and protocol of the abuse policy statements officially adopted by the Church of God in Christ, Mennonite:

- "Guidelines for Congregational Study and Instruction"
- "Congregational Sexual Abuse Policy"
- "Procedure in Regard to Allegations of Sexual Abuse"

Every school board member and teacher, including teachers' aides, should be familiar with these stated policy statements.

B. **General teacher orientation for awareness and responsibility**

- State and provincial laws recognize schoolteachers as responsible figures in a child's life, placing much responsibility on them to safeguard their students from child abuse. This includes their own actions with children as well as being alert to signs of abuse in their students.
- Be alert to negative changes in behavior or responses. This is probably the first thing that will be noticed. A new teacher should probably not try to analyze all the reasons that children act or respond as they do. There will be those who, by their nature, are quite forward and outgoing. Others will be bashful and reticent, with many variations in between. Mischievous, devious, or even bad behavior is not necessarily a sign of abuse or abuse history. Of more concern are noticeable, troubling changes in a child's behavior—cheerful to sullen or soft-natured to angry, for example. These indicators merit some questions by the teacher such as, "Is there something bothering you? Is there anything we need to talk about or that you need to tell someone?" Is the child's response calm and open or silent, emotional, or angry? Such responses are not necessarily because of abuse; there may be other causes of turmoil in the child's home. However, a caring teacher will be alert and aware of these things, and will share them with the school board for any appropriate follow-up action.
- A child suffering from abuse will likely not tell the teacher everything that is happening. However, the teacher should be alert to things the student shares that he or she is obviously troubled or confused about, or happenings that they cannot seem to explain logically. It is very important that students feel safe sharing personal things with their teacher.
- If there is reasonable suspicion that a child is suffering from abuse of some kind, the teacher should share that concern with a member of the school board or a minister or deacon of the local congregation for any necessary action or reporting to legal authorities. In today's heightened awareness of this issue, and being mindful of the responsibility society has placed on schoolteachers for the students' safety, it is better to share with someone when there is a question than not to do so.
- This subject is not something teachers should be afraid of. They should not view their students or their families with suspicion, or regard certain ones as prospective cases of abuse. The teachers' responsibility is to have their eyes and hearts open, to be keen to the Holy Spirit's leading, and to be aware of the potential for and signs of abuse. The first priority of our schools is the students' development, well-being, and safety in a secure environment.