

SAFE MINISTRY POLICY

**PROTECTION OF VULNERABLE PEOPLE –
CHILDREN, YOUTH AND CHALLENGED ADULTS**

**PRESBYTERIAN REFORMED CHURCH OF SUTHERLAND
2021**

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4. Changes in this version

DOCS changed to **FACS** in all sections

Definition added:

3.17 FACS

Family and Community Services – NSW State Government agency

New subsection added (as a requirement of our insurer):

6.2.2 Duties

The Protection Officer is responsible to:

6.2.2.6 Report the alleged abuse to the:

Session Clerk and Teaching Elder

Police and FACS if the alleged abuse definitely is criminal behaviour or potentially is criminal behaviour

Insurance Company if it has become a Police and FACS matter – quoting case reference numbers only (no personal details)

Insurance Company if there is a reasonable suspicion of sexual abuse having occurred

5. Positional statement¹

It is a privilege to serve Christ in working with those who entrust themselves to our care – particularly children, young people and vulnerable people - as we help them either to become and/or to mature as disciples of Christ within the context of our church activities.

However, with privilege comes responsibility. This is the reason for this document on Safe Ministry. We have a high calling to protect the vulnerable among us, especially the very young, and it comes from none other than the Lord Jesus Himself:

Let the children come to Me and do not hinder them for the Kingdom of God belongs to such as these. I tell you the truth, anyone who will not receive the Kingdom of God like a little child will never enter into it. And He took the children in His arms, put His hands on them and blessed them. (Mark 10:14-16)

And Jehovah God addressed the concept of the quartet of the vulnerable through the mouth of Malachi:

*And I will come near you for judgment;
I will be a swift witness against sorcerers, against adulterers, against perjurers,
against those who exploit wage earners and widows and orphans, and against those
who turn away an alien—
Because they do not fear Me,” says the LORD of hosts. (Malachi 3:6)*

Just as those first century children felt safe in Jesus’ arms, so all children who come into contact with the Presbyterian Reformed Church should feel safe and secure in our care. Their parents should also feel confident in leaving their children with us, knowing that we shall protect them from harm’s way, while sharing the love of Christ in word and deed through our ministry. Just as Christ was concerned to restore a demoniac to his right mind, so we seek to protect and correct those with behavior which makes them vulnerable.

This policy document outlines principles and practices adopted by the Presbyterian Reformed Church of Australia and its constituent congregations.

As a national organization, the Presbyterian Reformed Church of Australia is committed to Safe Ministry by:

- practicing and advocating Biblical ministry which includes and values children, young people and the vulnerable,
- complying with secular (governmental) requirements concerning all vulnerable people,
- disciplining and counselling any who exploit children, young people or the vulnerable,
- delivering to the civil authorities any whose conduct infringes criminal codes, and
- reviewing and assessing this policy document on a regular basis.

¹ Acknowledgement is made to *Safe Ministry*, Youthworks Ministry Support, Anglican Church Diocese of Sydney

This will be achieved by requiring each local congregation to:

- provide a safe, friendly and supportive environment in which all can be nurtured in their spiritual and secular growth, and
- implement relevant legislative requirements (such as Child and Youth Protection Policies),
- maintain current records pertaining to child-related and youth activities,
- provide accessibility to such records (except those subject to privacy and/or *sub judice* conditions),
- appoint approved workers for child-related and youth activities,
- discipline and counsel any who exploit children, young people or the vulnerable,
- deliver to the civil authorities any whose conduct infringes criminal codes,
- provide training programs open to all church members (but which are mandatory for all working with children and youth,
- adopt this policy document (with amendments which are relevant to the local jurisdiction in which they operate), and
- review their local policy annually (at an AGM or a specifically convened meeting).

6. A Biblical Perspective

A hallmark of true religion has always been a willingness on the part of God's people to defend the cause of the defenceless, even if that cause should appear to be very unpopular in the eyes of the world. But the true person of God does not go by appearance, but rather seeks to judge righteously (John 7:24).

This readiness to adopt unpopular causes in the defence of the defenceless find's expression in the Old Testament in frequent references to taking up the case of the *"the stranger, the fatherless and the widow"* (eg. Exod 22:22-24, Psa 82, Jer 7:5-7, Zech 7:10) – indeed, in this, we emulate God Himself (Deut 10:18,19, Psa 10:17,18, Psa 146).

Even where, in the New Testament, the "people of God" were more clearly identified as a spiritual people (rather than a political body), from the earliest days a defining characteristic was still to identify those who were disenfranchised and easily overlooked, in order to come to their aid (see Acts 6:1). James makes the point that this is not an accident of our religion, but of its very essence – essential to true holiness: *"Pure and undefiled religion before God and the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their trouble, and to keep oneself unspotted from the world"* (Jas 1:27).

In more recent times the Christian church (and, thankfully, society) has become more aware that a constituency in our midst that is truly defenceless, and hence needs our help, are those who are victims of child abuse. There is no sincere or thoughtful Christian who would not whole-heartedly come to the defence of such little ones. This comes naturally since, not only is the crime itself utterly repulsive, but the victims (as little children) readily evoke our sympathy (Luke 17:1-2).

Society is also becoming more aware of exploitation of elderly people and people with disabilities.

Along with these we also recognise another class of those who are vulnerable, i.e. those who may be (either mistakenly or deliberately) falsely accused of child abuse. These also suffer a serious offence (see Deut 19:16-21), and rarely recover their reputation once the accusation is made public.

Hence, when an accusation is made, it is extremely important that we, as a church, judge with righteous judgment (Prov 17:15) – "the house of God, which is the church of the living God, (is) the pillar and ground of the truth" (1 Tim 3:15). If a member of the church is involved, as either accuser or accused, the church is obliged to investigate the matter and take appropriate action consistent with the legal and government procedures. Where a crime has alleged to have been committed, the matter will also need to come before the courts (Rom 13:1-4). The church, however, may not abrogate its responsibility by leaving it all to the courts; the Bible says this would be the "shame" of the church.

If an accusation is made that proves to be true, the perpetrator must be made to face up to the consequences of their sin before the church, and their crime before the courts; if false, then the one making the accusation must be made to face up to the consequences of making a false accusation. Either way, where a serious accusation has been made there is serious sin that needs to be addressed.

However, in framing this protocol, the Church recognises that we need to do more than

address problems once they have arisen. The Bible requires us (e.g., as *per* the principle in Deut 22:8) to do all we reasonably can to foresee possible sources of danger and put in place reasonable safeguards. We also recognise the need in this to strike a sensible balance between taking reasonable precautions on the one hand, and, on the other, not being unreasonably oppressive when it comes to guarding against possible scenarios.

7. Definitions and Acronyms

- 3.1. PRCA
Presbyterian Reformed Church of Australia.
- 3.2. Church
Presbyterian Reformed Church of Australia.
- 3.3. Child
A person under the age of 12 years (generally at Primary School).
- 3.4. Young Person
A person from 12 to 18 years of age.
- 3.5. Vulnerable person
A child or someone who by reason of mental or other disability, age or illnesses may be unable to take care of or protect themselves against harm or exploitation by another person.

3.6. Abuse.

The Church recognizes four categories of abuse:

- 3.6.1. (Serious) physical abuse occurs when a child or vulnerable person is severely and/or persistently hurt or injured. It can occur in the context of domestic violence. This constitutes a reportable offence.
- 3.6.2. **Sexual abuse** occurs when a child or vulnerable person is exposed or subjected to sexual behaviours or threat to commit such behaviours that are exploitative or inappropriate. This constitutes a reportable offence
- 3.6.3. It usually occurs when a person uses their power and authority to take advantage of another's trust to involve them in sexual activity. Sexual abuse does not necessarily involve genital or physical contact. It includes any act which erodes the sexual boundary between two persons. It may appear to be consensual, but the validity of consent is negated by the power differential.
- 3.6.4. **Emotional (psychological) abuse** occurs when a child or vulnerable person is repeatedly treated in ways that damage their ability to feel, express their feelings and develop self-esteem. This does not automatically constitute a reportable offence.
- 3.6.5. **Neglect** occurs when a child or vulnerable person is deprived of the basic physical and emotional necessities of life (such as freedom of movement, food, medical care, clothing, housing, education) . This may constitute a criminal act and hence may be a reportable offence.

The Church views abuse of a child or vulnerable person spiritually as an abhorrent sin which is contrary to the essence of Christianity and secularly as potential criminal activity.

3.7. Elder

A man elected by a congregation to undertake responsibility for the spiritual and temporal needs of the congregation.

3.8. Session

The body of elected and employed elders (who are responsible to oversee all of the activities within a Church congregation).

3.9. Session Clerk

The elder tasked with administrative responsibility for the working of a congregation and he is the channel through which all business papers and other correspondence to the Court must be sent.

3.10. Teaching Elder

The elder tasked with the responsibility for the teaching / preaching ministry to a congregation – usually a paid employee (full or part-time).

3.11. Deacon

A man elected by a congregation to undertake responsibility for the temporal needs of a congregation.

3.12. Leader

Any person (usually of age 18 years and older) to whom a Session has given responsibility for teaching and/or oversight of a recognized activity of the Church.

- 3.13. CPP
Child Protection Policy.
- 3.14. PO
Protection Officer.
- 3.15. Record Apart
The Session keeps a Record Apart for use in cases where moral delinquency is alleged. When the case is finally disposed of and has resulted in full acquittal, the person, whose innocence has been proved, receives a certified copy of the judgment of the Court.
If any degree of public censure is involved an appropriate minute stating the charges against the person named and the judgment of the Court shall be recorded in the Ordinary Record (Session Minutes).
- 3.16. WWCC
Working With Children Check – a generic term which varies slightly between jurisdictions. The laws, structure and reporting mechanisms of each jurisdiction may differ also.
The WWCC is a screening strategy that aims to safeguard children by identifying and deterring people with the kinds of criminal histories that pose a risk of harm to children.
Key elements usually include a National Criminal Record Check and the ongoing collection and assessment of information that is relevant to whether a person engaged in child-related work may pose a risk to those under their care.
- 3.17. FACS
Family and Community Services – NSW State Government agency

4. Positions for Ministry

The following positions within the Church have been currently identified:

- Employee (any paid worker)
- Elder
- Deacon
- Crèche carer
- Sunday School Superintendent
- Sunday School teacher and helper
- Kids' Club leader and helper
- Youth Group leader and helper
- Scripture (Religious Education) teacher
- Adult carer

If a new ministry is started within the church relating to children and vulnerable people, then this policy will be amended to include relevant positions.

5. Code Of Conduct

The following guidelines are to be observed in the conduct of any church activity. Leaders are to ensure that these standards of conduct are maintained:

Appropriate Conduct For All Church Activities

- 5.1. Leaders will not visit children/young people in their homes unless an appropriate adult is present and/or another leader accompanies them, or permission has been given by a parent or guardian.
- 5.2. In any physical contact with children or young people, leaders will respect the feelings and privacy of that child or young person.
- 5.3. A Biblical pattern of behaviour is to be observed with respect to modesty and chastity and standards of morality. Adults and children/young people are to respect the privacy of the other during activities that require undressing, dressing or changing clothes. Leaders are to set an example by protecting their own privacy in similar situations. No leader shall be alone in a room with a child while either is undressing / changing clothes – unless
 - there is a known direct family relationship
 - there is a legal guardianship relationship
 - permission has been given by parents / guardians.
- 5.4. Initiations and secret ceremonies are forbidden. All aspects of every child related or youth programme are to be open to observation by parents and/or guardians.
- 5.5. Leaders have the right to ask persons who do not have a valid reason to be present at child related activities to leave. Police may be contacted if such persons refuse to comply with any such reasonable request.
- 5.6. There shall always be at least two approved leaders at any activity (except for crèche, where a sole female leader is acceptable). Preferably there should be male and female leaders for mixed groups and male leaders for boys groups and female leaders for girls groups wherever possible. It is recognised that there may be occasions where there is a sole leader when breaking up into small groups; but in such cases, the small groups will not be out of eyesight or earshot (or both) of others.
- 5.7. If any personal counselling is to be done, it shall be carried out within the sight of other people, and preferably another leader.
- 5.8. The consumption of alcohol or illegal drugs on the church grounds or during a church activity is forbidden. Any child or young person found to be under the influence of alcohol or illegal drugs is to be counselled and removed from the activity.
- 5.9. Any alcohol or illegal drugs found on the church grounds are to be witnessed (by a second person), removed and the location of such alcohol or illegal drugs reported to an elder. Where appropriate, police should be informed.
- 5.10. If any child/young person is required to take medication, a letter, or verbal assurance from their parents/guardians will be provided to the leader who will document this communication.

Inappropriate Behaviour By Leaders

Whilst some actions are not regarded as sexual assault, they are nonetheless regarded as unacceptable behaviour by Christians. These include:

- 5.11. Inappropriate conversation of a sexual nature
- 5.12. Coarse language, especially that of a sexual nature.
- 5.13. Suggestive gestures or remarks
- 5.14. Jokes of a sexual nature
- 5.15. Inappropriate literature or media usage (such as books, magazines, videos, DVDs, smartphones, computer, internet sources)
- 5.16. Any act of violence committed by a leader.

6. Implementation

6.1 Registration

6.2.1. Registration of the Congregation

The congregation is registered with the Office of the Children's Guardian.

6.2.1. Registration of Workers

Each person working with children and / or vulnerable people will:

- hold a valid WWCC Reference Number
- have their details registered with the Office of the Children's Guardian
- have their details recorded with the Protection Officer.

6.2 Protection Officer

6.2.1. Session will appoint no less than two Protection Officers, and it is desirable that one be a female.

6.2.2. Duties

The Protection Officer is responsible to:

6.2.2.1 Inform the congregation of their availability and contact information

6.2.2.2 Ensure there is an alternate Officer in the case of absences

6.2.2.3 Promote to the congregation (including children) the nature of the role and responsibilities

6.2.2.4 Receive reports about alleged abuse from

- a complainant who claims they have been the subject of abuse in any church-related activity
- a third party who has witnessed in any church-related activity behaviours which they reasonably believe constitute abuse
- a complainant or a third party in relation to suspect activities by a church member outside the context of a church-related activity

6.2.2.5 Resolve speedily whether the alleged abuse possibly constitutes criminal behaviour

6.2.2.6 Report the alleged abuse to the:

- Session Clerk and Teaching Elder
- Police and FACS if the alleged abuse definitely is criminal behaviour or potentially is criminal behaviour
- Insurance Company if it has become a Police and FACS matter – quoting case reference numbers only (no personal details)
- Insurance Company if there is a reasonable suspicion of sexual abuse having occurred

6.2.2.7 Record and safeguard evidence provided regarding the alleged abuse

6.2.2.8 Remove themselves from deliberations if the alleged abuse involves a member of their family

- 6.2.2.8 Remain in contact with the investigating authorities (Police and FACS) and provide information to the Session Clerk and Teaching Elder as authorised by the authorities
- 6.2.2.8 Relay the record of evidence to the Session Clerk for inclusion in the (confidential) Record Apart

6.3 Record Keeping – Databases

The Session Clerk will keep non-confidential records of:

- a list of approved workers – easily accessible so that an appropriate person can be chosen for a ministry duty
- dates of appointments to and retirement from positions, names of referees used (if relevant) and training programs attended for each approved worker
- training programs delivered to the congregation – objectives, content, dates of delivery and attendees

The Session Clerk will keep confidential records (as a Record Apart) which:

- contain details of any alleged abuse
- detail the steps taken to process the alleged abuse
- contain details of all relevant documents and information relating to evidence
- contain records of communications made with all parties involved in the alleged abuse
- detail the resolution of the process and any conditions placed upon the parties involved
- are rigorously controlled under NSW privacy requirements
- are, after the alleged offence is resolved, kept for a minimum of 50 years within the congregation
- are, upon expiration of the 50 years limit or the emergence of administrative exigencies, to be deposited with the Ferguson Library Archives of the Presbyterian Church of Australia, Sydney.

6.4 Policy Review

At its first meeting each year the Session shall review this policy.

- If necessary Session will make recommendations to update this policy.
- Even if there are no amendments, Session will report on its deliberations to the congregation.
- If amendments are proposed, the congregation shall be made aware of and discuss them at the next AGM (usually February or March) or a specially convened congregational meeting within two months of the Session meeting.

7. Selection Process for Workers

Although the greater majority of positions within the Church are voluntary it is necessary under legislation for the following procedures to be followed if a person wants to undertake a church based activity that will involve them interacting with a child or young person:

- All applicants must submit to a WWCC.
- Successful applicants will receive a WWC Reference Number (or equivalent) and will give this to the Protection Officer who will record this information.
- All applicants should be approved by an elder from within the congregation.
- All references provided must be thoroughly checked and the relationship of the referee to the applicant established – as well as length of association, depth of the association and continuity of association.
- Behavioural questions are to be employed with referees, such as: “Do you have any concerns about this person working with children?”
- At least two forms of personal identification must be provided.
- Verification of formal qualifications presented by the applicant.
- Not appointing any person as a worker if that person has been worshipping in the congregation for less than six months.
- All positions within the congregation (except elders and deacons) should be subject to a probationary period - this will provide the Session with the opportunity to terminate the person’s role should there be any concerns about behavioural irregularities.

8. Dealing With Alleged Abuse

8.1 Children and Young People - Reporting Sexual and Serious Physical Abuse

- 8.1.1. All reports of alleged abuse are to be taken seriously and acted upon.
- 8.1.2. All notifiers of alleged abuse are to be given complete confidentiality.
- 8.1.3. A person may disclose, deliberately or inadvertently, that he / she is a victim of abuse. Alternatively there may be reasonable grounds to suspect a person has been or is being abused. "Reasonable grounds" is a subjective concept, but this does not remove responsibility from a person to act.
- 8.1.4. The person receiving a disclosure or having reasonable grounds for concern will report the matter to the PO. From that time the PO will be the only one to have carriage of the matter - becoming the liaison person with the Police and FACS. The PO will inform the teaching elder (or interim moderator) and Session Clerk about the allegation, but this will not become a matter of Session business, Session discussion or Presbytery involvement (but see section 8.1.5 following).
- 8.1.5. If the PO reports that the alleged perpetrator of the abuse is the Teaching Elder, the Session Clerk will immediately inform the Presbytery Moderator requesting that the Teaching Elder immediately be relieved of all duties.
- 8.1.6. An accused person who is holding a formal office in the congregation, or who is discharging a delegated responsibility will immediately be relieved of that office and/or responsibility.
- 8.1.7. The procedure above shall also apply in the case when a child discloses abuse that has occurred somewhere other than the church (e.g. home, school, sporting club).
- 8.1.8. There will be no disclosure to any interested parties connected with the allegedly abused child (to avoid contamination of evidence and prejudice of investigations).
- 8.1.9. Any available evidence (such as clothing worn by the child) is to be retained for possible forensic examination.

8.2 Children and Young People - Pastoral Care for Alleged Victims

Appropriate pastoral care will be extended to the alleged victim in:

- not pushing them to disclose details of the alleged assault
- not attempting to investigate the allegation
- assuring them that they are understood; that their disclosure is being taken seriously; that what has happened is not their fault and that they are correct in disclosing the alleged incident
- not making contact with the alleged abuser - if the person receiving the disclosure is already providing counsel to the alleged abuser, it will be advisable for another person to assume this responsibility for the duration of any investigation.
- maintaining confidentiality – speaking only to parties recommended by the Police (or their delegates) – although this may cause emotional tension

8.3 Children and Young People - Non Sexual Abuse

An allegation of abuse which is clearly not sexual in nature must be analysed by the PO and the teaching elder according to the veracity of the evidence and severity of the alleged abuse. They will make a determination as to whether the Police and/or relevant government agency are to be notified.

8.4 Adults

Disclosure of abuse and suspicion of abuse with respect to adults can be dealt with in a more direct manner, but it should be realised that domestic violence is often covered up by female recipients.

Whilst abuse of children is subject to mandatory reporting, adult reporting is not, but any evidence of criminal behaviour requires compliance with the law. A lack of notification renders us guilty of being an accessory after the fact.

8.5 Vulnerable People

Physically disabled people, older people and those with mental issues are to be treated with the same sensitivity as children.

8.6 Church discipline

The church reserves the right to carry out its own Biblical disciplinary procedures in accordance with the constitution of the church. The church also reserves the right to take a matter forward to the Police or a Government agency even though the matter may not require mandatory reporting.

8.7 Status of Accused Persons

A person found guilty of being an abuser has betrayed the trust placed in them and committed sinful acts.

Alleged accusers must immediately be relieved of all duties which involve care, oversight and teaching – and this is to continue while investigations are in progress.

8.8 False Accusations

Accusations of abuse may prove to be false – either due to ignorance or malice.

1. Reputations can be irrevocably tarnished by a false accusation
2. “Bearing false witness” is condemned in Scripture (the 9th Commandment)
3. False accusations may themselves constitute criminal behaviour and such redress should be contemplated if there is no repentance.
4. Accusations due to ignorance are to be dealt with in the context of counselling and seeking mutual forgiveness.
5. However, the fear of being wrong in reporting situations where it is believed that abuse has occurred, is not sufficient ground for not reporting the concern.

8.9 Pastoral Care

All situations involving abuse and accusations of abuse are highly emotional, damaging and potentially long-lasting. Parties not directly involved will also be deeply affected. It is therefore a paramount concern that all parties – accused, victim and congregational members – receive organised and targeted pastoral care.

8.10 Termination of Employment

Any worker in paid employment who is found guilty of sexual abuse shall have his or her employment terminated immediately.

9. Working With A Body External to the Church

Some child related ministries in the church may be conducted through affiliation with other organisations. Those organisations may have their own policies governing the issues of child safety and abuse.

No such affiliation will be entered into unless the policies in this document can be maintained during activities carried out under that affiliation.

In some cases the administration of such policies may be in the hands of the affiliate organisation, and for convenience such changes as are necessary to the roles and procedures set out in this document will be adopted. Where such changes would affect the core of the Child Protection Policy, approval from the Session is necessary.

Before promoting the relevant activity the PRCA will satisfy itself that the amended policies, and the administration of them, are consistent with the policies and procedures contained in this document in all material respects.

10. Training

10.1 Scope of Training

Within the congregation there will be delivery of training programs which inform participants of all of the following areas:

1. application of the Safe Ministry Policy,
2. supervision and accountability mechanisms,
3. reporting procedures – what to report, who to report to and how it will be responded to,
4. risk management awareness,
5. responding to children,
6. child development,
7. understanding indicators of abuse to vulnerable people.

10.2 Training Program Outcomes

Participants will be able to:

1. demonstrate knowledge of the PRCA policy document.
2. Identify circumstances that indicate “risk of harm” to a vulnerable person
3. explain the effects on vulnerable people (particularly children) of these circumstances
4. describe their own role in their church ministries
5. describe the types of sexual misconduct that may constitute reportable behaviour
6. describe the types of physical assault that may constitute reportable behaviour
7. demonstrate how to make a report of alleged misconduct
8. demonstrate a child focussed response to disclosure of alleged misconduct by a child
9. demonstrate what is required in a safe and supportive environment for children and vulnerable people
10. identify what is acceptable practice in interaction with vulnerable people
11. demonstrate appropriate supportive behaviour for those who disclose abuse and those who are accused of it.