

As a community of congregations, everyone in MCEC has a duty to ensure that our congregations are safe spaces so that persons of all ages can freely enjoy the many gifts and opportunities of our faith communities. Protecting persons from sexual harassment and abuse is everyone's responsibility.

Sexual misconduct by church leaders is a topic most people want to avoid. Unfortunately, the church is not immune, abuse does occur, and the effects can be devastating. It is a topic we need to talk about in our congregations. When sexual misconduct occurs (that is, uninvited sexual engagement of any kind by a church leader), the church takes this very seriously. At no time, can we as a church cover-up or ignore sexual abuse or even the risk of sexual abuse.

As the MCEC community of congregations, we need to create an environment that is as highly "abuse proof" as possible. As congregations, we must do everything we can to ensure that our congregational environments, whether physical, emotional, or spiritual, are as immune as possible to the potential for abuse. Every congregation needs to have its own Safe Spaces policy that is rigorously implemented and frequently reviewed and updated. Creating a culture where sexual harassment and abuse are not tolerated and ongoing education equips both young and old to be resistant to abuse attempts should be a priority of every MCEC congregation. Zero tolerance for abuse by church leaders needs to be the standard for the church, however, zero tolerance for abuse must also become the standard for every relationship in the faith community.

In addition, the church needs to foster an environment that is as "victim friendly" as possible. Despite our best attempts, abuse can still occur. When it does, victims deserve to be heard and the harm must be acknowledged. If ongoing, it must be stopped immediately. When persons have experienced sexual misconduct, they need to be heard and offered support to move beyond the pain to a place of restoration and healing. It is vitally important that the church creates an environment that is safe for victims of abuse to tell their story, where victim confidentiality is respected, and where victims are encouraged to seek support and generously receive compassion and care from the faith community.

In the past few years, MCEC has unfortunately dealt with several incidents of sexual abuse by ministerial leaders. Whenever MCEC is informed of a suspicion or incident of abuse the concern is taken seriously. Allegations of abuse are investigated according to MCEC's ministerial misconduct policy and appropriate discipline is enforced. If MCEC is informed of an allegation of abuse by a non-credentialed church leader, MCEC does not investigate directly but provides support and guidance for the appropriate congregational leaders so that they can conduct their own investigation. MCEC funds an interdenominational resource group called the Sexual Misconduct and Abuse Resource Response Team (SMARRT), which is available to MCEC and to congregations to assist with investigations and provide guidance for follow-up in the congregation. SMARRT also offers preventive education on sexual abuse.

In response to the above concerns, MCEC has taken additional steps to help congregations become safer communities that are more immune to sexual harassment and abuse.

- In September 2015 MCEC launched a series of web pages entitled, *Reporting Sexual Misconduct by Church Leaders*. This web resource can be accessed on the MCEC homepage (mcec.ca) and provides an overview of what constitutes sexual misconduct, describes how MCEC responds to sexual misconduct, and offers a mechanism to report misconduct.

SACRED TRUST

FOSTERING SAFE SPACE IN CONGREGATIONS

- In January 2016 MCEC added an educational feature to the website entitled *Sacred Trust – Fostering Safe Space in Congregations*. Carol Penner, former MCEC pastor, has been commissioned to write a series of educational stories that help us to understand the nature of sexual misconduct. These will continue to be released online throughout the year and it is MCEC's intent to publish them in print at some point in the future. Congregations are encouraged to promote these resources and to use them for Sunday School material for youth and adults.
- MCEC has also promoted the SMARRT curriculum, *Circles of Grace*, which gives children and teens concepts and language to enable them to feel safe in their various environments (linked from mcec.ca/sacredtrust). MCEC encourages every congregation to include this resource in their congregational strategy to prevent sexual harassment and abuse. SMARRT has a promotional video to help acquaint leaders with this material.
- MCEC has also adopted a therapeutic counselling policy to support persons who have experienced misconduct by a credentialed leader. Persons who are victims of ministerial sexual misconduct can confidentially request support for counselling by contacting SMARRT or the MCEC Area Church Minister.

What else does MCEC do to prevent sexual misconduct?

- All MCEC ministers sign a *Covenant Regarding Ethics in Ministry* with MCEC and the congregation in which they are serving.
- Every five years all active and credentialed ministers are required to attend continuing education events such as the Healthy Pastoral Relationships Workshop which outlines appropriate behavioral boundaries.
- As an Area Church, MCEC has its own misconduct and sexual harassment policies that govern staff conduct and protocols.
- MCEC also has its own Safe Spaces policy that guides how MCEC sponsored events such as Youth retreats or Jr. Youth events are conducted, including a requirement for police checks, reference checks, supervision ratios, etc.
- MCEC strongly encourages all congregations to construct and implement a Safe Church Policy, which outlines appropriate and inappropriate behavior, requires windows in commonly used meeting spaces, and sets in place practical procedures to ensure that their faith community is a safe space for everyone.
- MCEC funds and works with SMARRT to provide education and resources to foster Church as a safe space for persons of all ages.

MCEC is committed to supporting congregations to ensure that they are safe for everyone. Together, let's do our part to foster safe space in our congregations. It's a sacred trust!

David Martin
Executive Minister

SACRED TRUST: INTRODUCING SEXUAL MISCONDUCT AND ABUSE RESOURCE RESPONSE TEAM

The SMARRT team is a cooperative Restorative Justice Program and includes representatives from the Brethren in Christ Canada, the Ontario Conference of Mennonite Brethren Churches and the Mennonite Church of Eastern Canada. While functioning within the three constituent conferences the team also assists other conferences part of the family of Mennonite Central Committee Ontario upon request and as exemplified in this year a congregation outside of our community.

Requests come through the MCCO office. For more information please contact us at 519-745-8458 x 254 or toll free 1-800-313-6226 ex 254 or email smarrt@MCCO.ca.

Our primary mandate continues to assist conferences and congregations with information and resources about a number of issues including sexual misconduct, abuse and the establishment of healthy boundaries. We also continue to support and mentor pastoral and lay leadership in these areas as well.

We continue to champion the “Circle of Grace” safe place program which has been implemented by a number of congregations. This program is valuable curriculum for children and youth in the area of healthy boundaries and is a key tool in the prevention of abuse. SMARRT is available with information on this program for any congregations contemplating using this resource.

The Team is aware of the risk of the internet as it relates to sexual misconduct. We have identified a number of informative resources to assist church leadership and members in this area of concern. Team members have gained insight into these types of concerns due to our involvement in supporting various congregations.

SMARRT Continues to respond to incidents of sexual misconduct and abuse by providing leadership in investigations, facilitating counselling, and helping with healing and restoration. Over the last year the team has been involved in eight incidents by providing consultations to MCEC leadership and local pastors, meeting with congregations, and providing counselling to affected individuals. During one particular incident almost the entire team was involved with providing assistance.

SMARRT will continue to be available to the conferences and congregations in the areas of resources, prevention and in dealing with incidents. The Team contains a wide range of skill sets and experience. We encourage you make use of our services.

This year one of our charter members retired after almost 25 years of service. Her service is appreciated and we deeply cherish her faith and friendship.

The members of SMARRT appreciate your prayers and support.

The Team:

Leonard Chester, Administrative Manager, BIC Representative

Joan Hyatt, Mennonite Brethren Representative

Julie Torrance-Perks and John Rempel, MCEC Representatives

Beth Springle and Allister Field, Brethren in Christ Representatives

Eileen Henderson, MCC Staff member