

## **Practices to support Faith Mennonite in being a safe and welcoming church**

### **Responding to disruptions during a worship service**

After we had a visitor who sought to interrupt a worship service in July 2009, a small group from FMC met to consider how to respond if there were disruptions at future services. The overall message we seek to convey is that all are welcome, but disrespectful behaviors are not welcome. We want to respond to disruptions that honor the congregation's need for safety and protection, as well as honor the needs to be open, respectful and nonviolent.

If there are disrespectful interruptions of a service, there are many roles to be played, based on the gifts, skills, and callings that we each have. For example, some might be called to prayer, others to care for children, others to assist the ushers, etc. The following is a list of actions to draw on, based upon the situation.

- If someone is outside of the church protesting or providing a challenging presence, at least one person from the congregation is encouraged to stay outside with the protester to engage and understand their message and intentions. Any invitation to “come and see” should include an explicit message that we expect respectful, non-disruptive behavior; that we are willing to engage in dialogue but it will happen outside of the worship service. One option would be to invite the person to go and have coffee, in which case another FMC person should be invited to go along. If the protester wishes to enter the church and worship, the person who has been in conversation with him/her can help the ushers and others in the congregation understand how to respond, if a disruption does occur.
- If a person enters and begins to cause a disruption, other people from the congregation (who feel so called) should go to the back of the church and join the ushers in preventing the person from advancing into the sanctuary, in a respectful, firm, and persistent manner.
- The worship leader, pastor, or ushers can call out “118,” to ask the congregation to sing the hymn “Praise God from Whom (#118 HWB) as a way to diffuse the energy and attention in the congregation.
- The ushers will be the ones to decide if and when to call 911. If there is an indication that the person causing a disruption has a weapon, the ushers will call 911 immediately. In other cases, the ushers will discern if and when to call 911.
- If there is a disruption in the congregation, people leading worship can choose to adjust the worship plans to limit disruptions. For example, the open sharing of joys and concerns could be skipped, and the person leading the prayer could just say the prayer.
- If something unexpected and unsettling has happened during the service, many of us might have the need to talk through what happened and hear the reactions of others. During announcement time, the pastor or worship leader should designate a place (such as a corner of the fellowship hall or the chapel) where people who would like to process their responses are encouraged to gather to provide a quiet space and opportunity for people to talk through what happened.

We will hold an annual meeting of ushers to review these guidelines and to bring additional perspectives from nonviolence practitioners in our church and a mental health professional from the community.

### **Creating a Safe Sanctuary**

While public disruptions capture our attention and create fear for some, as a congregation we may be more vulnerable to other, less visible risks to the safety of our children and more vulnerable members. The layout of our building with multiple entrances, levels, and wings makes it difficult to control who enters and has access to various areas of the church. We are also sadly aware that sexual misconduct occurs in churches and that most victims of sexual abuse know (and believe they can trust) their abuser.

We have designed the following precautionary guidelines in a spirit of care for the most vulnerable among us. We recognize that the care of children rests not just with parents but the entire church community and we encourage everyone to be diligent about the care of our children.

- All children through junior high age should be in the sanctuary (or nursery) during worship and in class rooms during the education hour, unless the family chooses a responsible, known adult to be with them. These children should be accompanied by a parent if they go to the basement restrooms during worship.
- The 28<sup>th</sup> Avenue door will be locked at the beginning of children's time, decreasing the number of available entrances. A sign will be placed on the door saying: "During worship, enter by the front door."
- Children should not leave the building alone, and children and youth should not leave the building with an adult other than their parents (i.e. teacher, youth leader, etc.) without prior notice to parents.
- Anyone who sees a child leaving the building alone or finds a child alone without a parent should assist the child in finding his/her parent.
- Children should not be in the kitchen without an adult supervisor present. Cutting knives should be stored in one of the elevated cupboards, out of reach of children.
- Every person who takes on a role in which they will be alone with children, (i.e. children's Sunday school teacher, youth leader, or youth mentor) will undergo a background check.
- Parents of nursery-aged children are instructed to take their children to the bathroom at the beginning of nursery care and between worship and education hour. A portable potty chair will be kept in the back of the nursery for emergency needs so that nursery volunteers do not need to take children to the bathroom.

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