

WISE AS SERPENTS, HARMLESS AS DOVES

A Spiritual Approach to Abuse Prevention in Friends Meetings

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Introduction

Behold, I am sending you out like sheep in the midst of wolves; be wary and wise as serpents, and be innocent (harmless, guileless, and without falsity) as doves.

Matthew 10:16 (Amplified Bible Classic Edition)

Background:

In July of 2021, as a member of the Abuse Prevention Task Force for the newly formed Sierra-Cascades Yearly Meeting of Friends (SCYMF), I was assigned the duty of drafting policy for our Yearly Meeting for the prevention of abuse of children and vulnerable adults.

SCYMF also contracted with Safe Communities, an organization based in Lancaster, PA which offers consulting for faith communities on this issue and has worked with a number of anabaptist communities. Safe Communities was contracted to help us develop policy that not only reflects our theology and values as a Yearly Meeting, but also the evidence-based best practices which have been shown to be effective in the prevention and appropriate handling of abuse. They are also providing trainings and educational sessions with the goal of developing a healthy culture around abuse prevention within the Yearly Meeting.

As part of my discernment for this policy, and as part of my seminary studies at Earlham School of Religion, I have been researching issues related to abuse prevention, looking at examples from the larger Quaker and Christian world, and conducting interviews with Quakers from evangelical, pastoral, and unprogrammed traditions about their personal experiences with implementing abuse prevention policies.

In this research, it has become evident to me that the majority of Quaker Meetings and Churches are underprepared for abuse prevention. Quaker-specific resources on this topic are lacking. Many Meetings lack the resources to pay for comprehensive professional consulting in developing policy. Meetings that developed policies often did so independently and without models.

Why this guide

It is only within the past few decades that the full truth about the epidemic of child sexual abuse has come to light, first outside, and then also within the Religious Society of Friends. Within this time period, the public has come to awareness about things that were once hidden from public view.

The prevalence of child sexual abuse

We now know that approximately one in five people experienced childhood sexual abuse, and

that occurs with similar prevalence regardless of gender. We also know that this kind of abuse can and does take place in Christian and Quaker communities.

The impact of child sexual abuse

The long-term emotional and psychological harm of childhood sexual abuse on its victims cannot be overstated. Abuse that occurs under the cover of Christian ministry is also spiritual abuse, and can forever impact a person's ability to experience God's love of them, and their sense of safety in communities of faith.

The nature of childhood sexual abuse

Most child sexual abuse is committed by individuals known and trusted by the victim. It is perpetrated in ways that are uniquely pathological and insidious, such that it is not adequately addressed by dealing with "sin", "abuse" or "mental health problems" as generalities. The same structures that we have designed to create networks of spiritual support and nurture can be manipulated by those who seek access to children and vulnerable people with the intent to abuse. Denial and ignorance in the community enable the perpetration of abuse, and tragically have allowed for abuse coverups within faith and secular institutions alike. Thus, child sexual abuse prevention is not simply a private problem, but one that requires a concerted, comprehensive, and informed collective response.

This document:

This document, based on my research, is meant to provide a guide for Quaker Meetings and Churches in the practical task of developing their own abuse prevention policies. The intent is to do that in a spiritual manner.

By "in a spiritual manner", I mean, for example:

1. Developing policies through actively practicing our spirituality—utilizing discernment practices and seeking policy that is grounded theologically and spiritually, as well as in research. Developing this policy can be an experience that strengthens individuals and the Meeting community spiritually.
2. Examining the spiritual dynamics behind abuse of the vulnerable and the spiritual function of boundaries which prevent such abuse, including developing safe guidelines on ministering to the spiritual needs of those who have abused others.
3. Operating as a Meeting in a manner which is not only protective, but also healing for survivors of trauma and abuse.

In my research I found that such resources were difficult to find for Quakers who participated in developing policies for their Meetings. Furthermore, I found that many Meetings had no policies. Most Meeting policies that existed were created reactively to emergent disclosures of abuse or to the presence of sex offenders in the Meeting.

Policies made in reaction to known abuse or abusers are not ideal for several reasons:

1. Obviously, reactive policies cannot prevent abuse that has already occurred in the Meeting before their implementation. Prevention is the primary goal, and that is a goal that is only reached proactively. Healthy response to disclosures is important, but it does not undo the damage that abuse has already caused.
2. Most abuse is hidden and most abusers are unknown, so responding only to what is immediately visible means *not* responding to the majority of abuse.
3. Reactive policies are a bomb in the Meeting. The time sensitivity and urgency of the situation, the intense emotions provoked by a disclosure, and the interpersonal involvement of individuals in the Meeting overwhelm sound discernment. Ensuing conflict may destroy the Meeting.
4. Reactive policies may focus on the liability of the Meeting, at the expense of the experience of victims/survivors. For example, the Meeting may be focused on distancing itself from responsibility, rather than responding to the pain of what happened to someone in the Meeting.
5. Reactive policies do not deal with grooming. Grooming is the first step in abuse. It is a process that occurs before abuse takes place, in order to create the opportunity to abuse. It involves the manipulation of potential victims, but before that, it often involves the manipulation of responsible adults who would likely protect potential victims. A proactive policy that addresses grooming is necessary to prevent abuse before it occurs.

My hope is that this document will make it easier for Meetings to begin discernment processes to develop policies proactively. Emergent situations are traumatic and emotionally charged, triggering fight, flight, freeze and fawn responses in the Meeting. Conversations and policies that are enacted from such a place are rarely Spirit-led, and it is easy to understand why. Our autonomic nervous system is designed to preserve life, not to consider complex situations and be faithful to God.

A Meeting beginning this process outside of crisis will be better able to discern from a place of clarity because they will be:

1. Better able to research thoroughly, and take in and process new information about this complex and difficult subject, an activity that human brains do best when relaxed.
2. Better able to morally reason, a frontal lobe and prefrontal cortex activity which is disrupted by stress and urgency.
3. Better able to listen compassionately to others who may understand these issues differently than they do. This empathetic connection with others is a positive cycle—it will in turn help to further emotionally regulate the Meeting as these difficult issues are

discussed, resulting in better moral reasoning, processing of new information, and compassionate listening.

4. Better able to productively pray, listen, and watch for God's guidance. When all of the above conditions are present, it is possible and more likely that a Meeting will experience a covered Meeting. A covered Meeting is when we tangibly experience the power of the Holy Spirit's immediate presence, collectively and not just individually.

If then there is any encouragement in Christ, any consolation from love, any sharing in the Spirit, any compassion and sympathy, make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others.

Phillipians 2:1-4 (New Revised Standard Version)

Components of a safety policy:

A basic safety policy focused on abuse requires several components.

Whoever is responsible for developing these policies in your Meeting needs to consider the Meeting's ministries, resources, and capacities and develop something which is both *effective* in combatting abuse, and *realistic* for your Meeting to implement.

To be effective, the policy needs to be specific and evidence-based. Often our instincts or theories about abuse are not accurate. We need to look at the science.

To be realistic to implement, the policy can not be too vague, flexible, expensive, time-consuming, bureaucratic or complicated to implement consistently. Wherever possible, the policy should make clear who is responsible for what, and ensure that that person has the training, resources, and accountability for them to follow through. *A policy which is not implemented is worse than no policy because it gives a false sense of security.* Our policy should not just be a legal formality, but a living testimony of integrity.

Here are the most basic components that need to be developed in every Meeting for safety:

- 1. A background check policy-** this is a basic starting point for prevention, and is required by many insurance companies. Your policy should include specifics such as who is required to have one, where and how they will be conducted, how often they need to be renewed, and who in the Meeting is responsible for making sure they happen. An enforced background check policy

protects the Meeting from lawsuits, and from known abusers, but since most abusers are unknown, it is not adequate as a prevention measure.

2. **A rule of three-** no adult should ever be alone with one person under 18 or vulnerable adult. This policy alone can prevent the majority of abuse that occurs in faith communities. Ideally, this policy should require two background checked adults any time there is a child present. If this is not realistic to implement, some Meetings modify it by allowing two youth to be present with one background checked adult.

3. **A reporting policy-** This should at minimum have your state laws on abuse reporting and instructions on how to make a report, but a Meeting may want a policy which is stronger than the state law. For example, your state law may not require church volunteers to report suspected abuse, but your faith community may choose to require this of volunteers.

4. **A safe environment policy-** Walk through the Meetinghouse and look for places that an adult who was trying to abuse someone might look for. Examples: doors with no windows on them, unlocked closets, bathrooms. Think about what policies you need to have in place to address these dangers. Examples: install windows on doors, require closets to be locked, develop a safe bathroom policy. Write these things into your policy.

5. **A known offender policy** – This policy should set boundaries and conditions for a person who is known to have abused in your community. This should include a covenant agreement which can be customized to each individual, specifics depending on their risk to the community. Important components of this agreement are what activities the person can and can't participate in, what supervision is required, and what other requirements there are such as cooperation with parole or specialized sex offender treatment, and what will happen if covenant is broken. *This is the most complex issue for Meetings to deal with and it is recommended that every single individual involved with developing this policy or individual covenants, and anyone who will have contact with a known offender go through specific training about offender behavior. (See resource list.)*

A Discernment Process for Abuse Prevention

Nominating

As you assemble an ad hoc committee or task force to develop policy, consider areas of expertise, as well as spiritual gifts of different individuals in your Meeting.

- Expertise: It is helpful to include people with expertise in abuse. This may be a trained social worker, or a survivor who has been through a healing process. (A person who is a

teacher, healthcare professional, counselor, or attorney may or may not have specific training about abuse.) It may also be helpful to have someone who has training in trauma-informed care who can help people understand what ways of approaching these issues might be overwhelming or harmful to people in your Meeting who live with trauma from abuse.

- **Spiritual gifts:** This committee needs people who have deep integrity, maturity, and trustworthiness. You might call people in your Meeting who care about children and youth. At least one person who prays deeply and powerfully should be on the committee. (Praying for survivors as you begin this process is especially important, including in your larger gatherings.) People who have strong gifts of discernment and wisdom should be on the committee.

Equipping

This committee should have some funding for training by professionals. Everyone on the committee should undergo training together. (See resources list for trainers.) This training should include specific training about understanding sex offender behavior, as sex offender behavior is “counterintuitive” to most people.

Model Meeting agenda:

9:00am--Opening: Silence, holding known and unknown survivors in the light, vocal prayer for protection of children/vulnerable people and healing of trauma, reading of psalms, or breathing/grounding exercise are good options for helping center the committee in its purpose.

9:10 am--Spiritual check-in: A time for members to share what is on their hearts and spirits this week. These are difficult issues for almost anyone to consider. As you begin talking about these issues in your wider Meeting, it is likely that strong emotions, conflicts, and stories of abuse will emerge. As a committee, it is important to show spiritual care to one another and to the process, and not to allow the tasks at hand to overwhelm your time for mutual care. Also consider who else in your Meeting might need spiritual care. Pray to be safe people for the Meeting.

9:40 am--Policy work: Working your way in each Meeting through one of the five basic sections of policy, each person on the committee might have a specific topic to research and share about with the committee. Example: look up State laws, call insurance company to ask for background check recommendations, read an article about trauma-informed care, etc. If there is something that is outside your capacity, your committee might invite a guest to come and

speak or answer questions about that topic. You might also sometimes have a training instead of policy work.

10:10--Worship sharing: Choose an issue or query from the “Beyond Policy” section below that feels pertinent to your Meeting. Invite responses to the query and sharing from the heart. Hold each response and respondent in the Light. Invite Spirit’s guidance. After everyone has shared, consider if there is any further action you feel led to take on this issue. For example, holding a listening session, threshing session, training, or issuing a minute.

10:50--Closing worship: You may have considered difficult topics in this meeting. Emotions and even conflicts may have emerged. People may feel overwhelmed. Take 10 minutes at the end give thanks for the work being done, to express commitment to one another, to sit in silence together, to pray for the Meeting, or do one of the practices listed in opening worship section.

11:00am—*Meeting ends*

Beyond policy: uncovering the spirits in your Meeting

See to it that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the universe, and not according to Christ.

Colossians 2:8 (New Revised Standard Version)

It is not only individual people, but also institutions, cultures and societies that have spirits. War is a spirit, for example, in that it draws people and institutions into its energy and seems to perpetuate itself.

Our culture at large has a spirit that enables abuse. Approximately one out of five children are sexually abused in our culture.

Many institutions also have spirits that enable abuse, even if their stated purpose and their intentions are noble and good. When we hear terms like “rape culture”, we are hearing the naming of such spirits. Experts have documented the patterns of a dynamic called “child sexual abuse accommodation syndrome”, whereby the trauma of abuse causes victims and their loved ones to respond in ways that perpetuate the abuse, rather than resolving it.

We can see the dynamics of these institutional spirits in many high-profile cases of abuse. Institutions often defend and protect abusers, and fail to resolve abuse in safe ways, even against their own institutional interests. Why do leaders cover up abuse when it is morally abhorrent to do so, and they risk their own jobs and the reputation of their institution by doing

so?

What I mean by a “spirit”:

- Many times these failures involve not just one or two individuals, so it is not only an issue about the personalities involved. In fact, sometimes people who are involved in covering up abuse do things that they themselves find unethical, but nonetheless feel pressured or compelled to do.
- Many times these failures happen despite policies that did not allow them, so it is not only an issue of policies.
- Many times the behaviors that make up these incidents follow established patterns. For example, discrediting or disbelieving victims, while protecting or trusting the accused, as if the abuse has an energy that can perpetuate itself.

When invisible forces drive dynamics, and overwhelm good people and policies, a spirit is at work. It is worthwhile for the committee to go through and look at areas where your Meetings ways of doing things represent a spirit or energetic force other than God. Undoing

Analyzing barriers to safety in the Meeting

Theological: There may be ways that interpretations of Quaker theological beliefs act as a vehicle for impeding safety measures, rather than as a vehicle for creating safety and healing of abuse in the community.

Are people overinvested in the redemption of perpetrators to the extent that they are willing to risk others' safety to “prove” that a person is redeemed? Is “that of God in everyone” interpreted as known abusers having equal freedom, authority, and protection as anyone else in the Meeting? Is “grace” misapplied, for example- only applied to accused and not to survivors? Is “grace” or “restorative justice” interpreted as the absence of boundaries and limitations for known abusers? Is forgiveness/healing expected or demanded of victims/survivors rather than seen as an outcome of a safe community? Is forgiveness interpreted as requiring victims/survivors to trust known abusers? Is there theology that centers the vulnerable (in this case, children/victims/survivors)? Are power/abuse dynamics accounted for in conflicts, or is conflict always seen as two equal sides with the conflict being the problem? Does the Meeting see insights of survivors as necessary and valuable to solutions?

Polity: There may be ways that our polity/process facilitates predatory behavior rather than prevents it.

Is there clarity about what must be done and who must do it by when? Are our processes simple, transparent, and functional enough to respond to problems? Does the Meeting assume that because we are a small or close-knit community, abuse cannot happen here? Are people

involved in discernment about specific individuals that they have a relationship with? Do people in charge of decisions about abuse lack appropriate training and resources to carry out their work? Are decisions in the Meeting always made interpersonally rather than institutionally leaving the Meeting vulnerable to manipulation? Are boundaries and rules left to interpretation/individual leading rather than being binding? Are roles unclear, so no one knows who is responsible for what tasks?

Do relationships/personalities rule the Meeting, rather than our agreements? Are decisions undermined because processes stall or individuals do not do what they have agreed to do?

Authority/leadership:

Do we struggle to speak plainly to one another out of fear of being unkind? Do we feel that we must say “yes” when the true inward discernment points to “no”? Do we have systems to vet and train newcomers? Does the Meeting make nominations based on discernment of gifts and leadings, or out of desperation? Can any person enter positions of leadership and authority in the Meeting easily and without vetting? Does the Meeting openly and honestly express concerns about nominations when they arise? Does the Meeting feel desperate for service or expertise, and fail to place limits on the power of those who offer it? Do we welcome righteous anger as constructive energy for change? Do we recognize and empower those gifted in leadership in our Meeting, or do we fear “tall poppies”? Do we delegate where it is appropriate and practical to do so? Does greater power come with greater transparency/accountability? Does the Meeting have systems for concerns that are raised about people in leadership? Do those in leadership welcome feedback and “calling them out”? Do leaders model safety, accountability, and integrity?

Conclusion

With the help of a committee dedicated to this work, your Meeting will have the opportunity to both create clear and functional policies that protect children and vulnerable people from abuse, and to grow spiritually through a Meeting-wide process of reflection and discernment about related issues. Hopefully, this process will be carried out with integrity and care for one another. Hopefully, when unhealthy patterns are discovered, you will find the courage and peace to transform those patterns, creating new ones in their place. Hopefully, in doing all these things, your Meeting will become a safer and more healing place for the survivors of abuse who are among its members and the wider community.

Abuse represents not only a private tragedy, but a community failure. May we build strong communities where no one is abused.

Resources for Meetings

Training and consulting organizations:

Darkness to Light: <https://www.d2l.org/>

4900 O’Hear Ave, Suite 205
North Charleston, SC 29405
National Helpline: 866.FOR.LIGHT
Administrative Office: 843.965.5444

Safe Communities:

<https://www.safecommunitiespa.org/>

313 W. Liberty St. Suite 242
Lancaster, PA 17603
717-560-9989
info@safecommunitiespa.org

Ministry Safe:

<https://ministrysafeinstitute.com/>

6001 River Oaks Blvd, Suite 400
Fort Worth, Texas 76114
Phone: 817-737-SAFE (7233)
Toll free: 833-737-SAFE (7233)

Books:

The Hidden Spirit: Discovering the Spirituality of Institutions, Edited by James Cobble Jr and Charles M. Elliot; Out of Print

Youth Ministry in a #MeToo Culture: Setting and Keeping Healthy Relational Boundaries, by James Cobble Jr; Christianity Today

Transforming a Rape Culture, Edited by Emilie Buchwald, Pamela Fletcher, Martha Roth; Milkweed Editions
Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence from Domestic Abuse to Political Terror, by Judith Hermann

Videos:

Cory Jewell Jensen, interviewed on PBS Connections. Jensen worked with offenders for over 30 years in Beaverton, Oregon: <https://www.pbs.org/video/wkgb-connections-cory-jewell-jensen/>

Websites:

The Federal Office of Justice Programs has a database of information. Particularly helpful is the research they have compiled on offender typology and behavior:

<https://smart.ojp.gov/somapi/initiative-home>