

# Safe Church for Connect Groups

## Our Safe Church Policy

MPBC in its Safe Church Policy is committed to providing and maintaining a safe, healthy and productive environment for all staff, volunteers, its congregation and those who participate in church-related activities. There are both theological and legislative obligations to ensure people are valued, treated well and provided with a safe and healthy church environment.

The MPBC Safe Church Policy has been developed to ensure that all leaders, participants and programs are safe, and that all people are respected and valued irrespective of gender, age, country of origin, cultural heritage, socio-economic background or ability.

To achieve this MPBC has guidelines and procedures in place to ensure both people and programs are safe.

## Safe Connect Groups

On a weekly basis church activities and programs take place in private homes of church members. Leaders of such groups have a responsibility to ensure that those who participate remain safe. Small groups are often perceived as safe and secure environments where people easily trust one another, but on deeper consideration they are vulnerable to people behaving wrongly and putting members at risk.

MPBC has put these guidelines together for Connect Group leaders as part of Safe Church Policy, due diligence and risk management, and would encourage all Connect Group leaders to read and understand them.

### Physical Environment

- Consider the safety of the physical environment. Identify and manage potential hazards for different aged people that might not normally be in your home e.g. dangers for small children, steps or trip hazards for elderly participants.
- Be aware of members who may have allergies or reactions to certain foods, or pets that may be at your home.
- In the case of having a swimming pool ensure pool fences and safety gates are in good working order.
- As the homeowner you are liable for all insurance claims pertaining to injury or accident to your connect group members while they are at your home.

## **Emotional and Spiritual Environment**

The emotional and spiritual environment of a connect group is equally important as the physical environment in which you meet. In fact, more people leave the Church due to a feeling or perception that their emotional and/or spiritual boundaries have been violated, rather than from a physical injury.

Ensuring safe emotional and spiritual environments is fundamentally about putting other people's needs above our own agenda and respecting personhood i.e. valuing individuals, their backgrounds, their personalities, their hope, dreams and fears. It is fostering a welcoming and caring ministry space, where people feel safe to share their ideas without being ridiculed.

The following points should be considered:

- Power of the role model – the behavior of all leaders is observed by the people they lead at all times. Inconsistencies between words and actions are quickly picked up and can soon lead to loss of credibility.
- Power of words – leaders are encouraged to think about the impact of the words they use and how they might be interpreted. Try to use positive words and not be discouraging, disaffirming, disrespectful or sarcastic. At times you may need to agree to differ on certain controversial subjects, rather than sustaining conflicting views which can lead to disunity and division.
- Responding to the needs of the individual – people are all different, and some are more vulnerable than others. Be prepared to ask a person what they need from you, ask permission to hug them, pray for them etc. Touch, counsel and emotional support must be provided in a sensitive manner with an emphasis on the other person's wellbeing rather than our own.
- Handling Private Information – obtaining information about people is sometimes essential to equip you to care for them but this information needs to be respected. The National Privacy Act states that private information is only collected if necessary; individuals concerned are advised of its intended use; personal information collected is stored securely and not divulged to others without permission; and when no longer required is destroyed.
- Create a safe environment for sharing – people desperately need safe places in their lives where they can be 'real'. For connect groups to be impactful in people's lives, the conversations must move below the surface into deeper sharing and prayer. This allows the relationships to grow in authenticity. However, this cannot happen if the people in the group do not feel safe to share personal information.
  - It is the responsibility of the connect group leader to consistently remind members of the need for confidentiality - stress that at all times "what is heard in the room stays in the room".
  - To give space for members to open up and be vulnerable, leaders need to ensure that the group will listen and support without being critical,

dismissive, disagreeing, or advice-giving. Responses to members' honest struggles need to be helpful and empathetic. Sometimes it is best to just listen and pray.

- Handling disclosures (sexual, domestic violence, adult to adult abuse) – leaders should be prepared to handle disclosures of a sensitive nature in case they occur in your connect group. There are potential conflicts with confidentiality here but at times there is information disclosed that does need to be acted on, even when it comes from a friend. Some confessions do have consequences. It can be useful to ask the person making a disclosure what they would like done with the information. For assistance in this area contact the Small Group Coordinator or Safe Church Assistant at MPBC or staff at Baptist Churches WA.

### **Home Group activities with Children**

- Where connect group meetings include the whole family, the care and well-being of the children and the nature of their activities, should be formally agreed on and accepted by all parents involved.
- Unless otherwise agreed, the children remain the responsibility of the parents.
- In the case that a person is asked to specifically take responsibility for the care of the children, they are required to hold a Working with Children's Card and a Volunteer National Police Certificate.
- In the situation where a Connect Group (with or without children) goes away for the weekend together or holds an additional social event, this is not deemed a MPBC event. If the group includes children they remain the responsibility of the parents for the duration of the event. This fact must be clearly communicated to participants in advance of the event.

### **Handling incidents and concerns**

A MPBC Incident Response form should be completed and submitted if any of the following occur at a Connect Group meeting:

- Injury or accident
- A sensitive disclosure is made
- As a Connect Group leader you have a concern regarding one of the members that you feel MPBC needs to be informed of

Incident Response Forms are available from the Church Office, at the Info Point on a Sunday and on the MPBC website ([www.mounties.org.au](http://www.mounties.org.au))

### **More information**

If you require more information on any of this material please contact the MPBC Safe Church Assistant ([andrea.thomas@mounties.org.au](mailto:andrea.thomas@mounties.org.au)), or speak to the Connect Group Coordinator ([craig.palmer@mounties.org.au](mailto:craig.palmer@mounties.org.au))

The full 'MPBC Safe Church Manual: Policy, Guidelines and Procedures' is available on request from the Church Office and is on the MPBC website ([www.mounties.org.au](http://www.mounties.org.au))