

6-15-2021

## Child Protection Policies and Practices in Mennonite Church USA Congregations: A Follow-Up Study

Jeanette Harder

*University of Nebraska at Omaha, jharder@unomaha.edu*

Elisabeth Wilder

*Dove's Nest*

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### Recommended Citation

Harder, J., & Wilder, E. (2021). Child protection practices in Mennonite Church USA congregations: A follow-up study. *Journal of Social Service Research*, 1–15. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01488376.2021.1936349>

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# **Child Protection Policies and Practices in Mennonite Church USA**

## **Congregations: A Follow-Up Study**

Jeanette Harder<sup>a\*</sup> and E. Wilder<sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup>University of Nebraska at Omaha, Omaha, NE, United States; Dove's Nest, Omaha, NE, United States

<sup>b</sup>Dove's Nest, Omaha, NE, United States

\*Corresponding author:

Jeanette Harder  
University of Nebraska at Omaha  
Grace Abbott School of Social Work  
CB 206  
Omaha, NE 68182  
U.S.  
jharder@unomaha.edu

Jeanette Harder is a professor at the Grace Abbott School of Social Work at the University of Nebraska at Omaha, and a co-founder and board member of Dove's Nest, a national nonprofit with the mission to keep children and youth safe in faith communities.

Elisabeth Wilder is a Licensed Master Social Worker in the state of Kansas. She has experience working with children and young adults in the United States, Colombia, Honduras, and Bolivia. Elisabeth is a current Juris Doctor candidate at Washburn University School of Law, and a volunteer with Dove's Nest.

As published in

Harder, J., & Wilder, E. (2021). Child protection practices in Mennonite Church USA congregations: A follow-up study. *Journal of Social Service Research*, 1–15.

# **Child Protection Policies and Practices in Mennonite Church USA**

## **Congregations: A Follow-Up Study**

### **Abstract**

While congregations have a spiritual mandate to be open and welcoming, they must be aware of the risks involved in ministry and be prepared to protect children from all types of abuse and neglect. In 2010 and again in 2018, Dove's Nest, a nonprofit organization, conducted an online survey to determine the characteristics, practices, and experiences of Mennonite Church USA congregations with and without written child protection policies.

The research questions for this study were:

- (1) What are the characteristics, practices, and experiences of congregations in regard to child protection, and how have they changed since 2010?
- (2) What is the relationship between types of congregations and their child protection practices?
- (3) What information and resources do congregations want to enhance their child protection practices?

While improvements were made, especially among congregations without child protection policies, much remains to be done. In particular, improvements are needed among small churches in urban settings. Implications for social work practice are included. Other denominations should conduct similar studies and engage non-English-speaking members. Further research is also needed to discover the prevalence of abuse among church members, and the impact of policies and other practices on the prevention of child abuse.

Keywords: Church, child abuse prevention, child protection, policy, Mennonite

## Introduction

The number of children who are abused within church or religious settings is unknown. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention estimate that one out of four women and approximately one out of six men were sexually abused as children (2020). Without evidence to the contrary, we must assume this abuse rate is similar to the context of this study: Mennonite Church USA, a small Christian denomination (Heggen, 2015). Mennonite Church USA falls under the broader umbrella of Anabaptism and is similar to Protestant denominations in many of its practices and beliefs (Kauffman, n.d.).

Due to the breaking of the Catholic abuse crisis story by the *Boston Globe*'s Spotlight team in 2002 (Robinson et al. 2002) and the subsequent *Spotlight* movie in 2015 (McCarthy, 2015), much scholarship has focused on the prevalence of abuse within the Catholic Church. Though an estimated 2–6% of Catholic clergy have been found to have sexually abused children (Hidalgo, 2007; John Jay College, 2004; Marcotte, 2008; Terry, 2008), insurance reports estimate that sexual abuse of children in Protestant churches may be higher than that of Catholic churches (French, 2007; Trull & Carter, 2004). These estimates still may be insufficient to understand the scope of sexual abuse within churches and religious settings considering that 93% of sexual abusers describe themselves as religious (Abel & Harlow, 2001).

In 2010, 269 Mennonite Church USA leaders responded to an online survey on child protection policies, personnel practices, child abuse experiences, preventative practices, and needs related to child protection and strengthening families within the context of their church settings. Harder and Haynie (2012) found that while many congregations had some awareness of child sexual abuse, many lacked written policies for both preventing and addressing child sexual abuse in their congregations.

Dove's Nest—a small, national nonprofit organization providing child protection services to faith communities, who had designed and implemented the above-mentioned survey—used the results to inform their trainings and resources. Eight years later, in 2018, they conducted a follow-up study to discern any differences in child protection policies and practices in Mennonite Church USA congregations.

## **Literature Review**

### ***Spirituality and Its Role in Well-Being***

Decades of research have identified spirituality as a key contributor to positive mental health, and scholarship is now beginning to coalesce around healthy spirituality as one of the primary determinants in overall well-being (van Dierendonck, 2012). Spirituality is typically described as beliefs and practices that relate to spiritual matters that may or may not be associated with an organized religion. While all religious practices have elements of spirituality, spirituality is not necessarily religious in nature. Community, purpose, meaning, and an ethical framework to make decisions are but a handful of benefits that are often inherent to many spiritual practices and to well-being. As houses of spirituality, churches are prime settings for congregants to receive these benefits.

Growing research suggests that children stand to benefit from spirituality, as high levels of religiosity in children are associated with lower levels of high-risk behaviors such as truancy, alcohol and drug use, and depression (Perry-Burney et al., 2014). Furthermore, research conducted by Crosby III, Smith, and Frederick (2015) found that children cited church as one of the few places they felt heard and that children were more prone to name a children's ministry worker than a family friend as a trusted person with whom to share their feelings. With estimates as high as 84% of youth identifying as religious, churches and other religious organizations are

primary places to teach and practice moral guidance (Perry-Burney et al., 2014; Sinha et al., 2007). Unfortunately, churches often provide the least protection and regulation to protect children from sexual abuse.

### ***The Church's Role in Preventing and Addressing Sexual Abuse***

With an estimated 314,000 churches and 60 million members (Pew Research Center, 2015) coupled with the intimate nature of religious practices and lack of formal policies, Protestant churches are susceptible to child sexual abuse. Whether the abuse occurs during worship, Sunday school, or informal gathering times, on or off church property, congregations are responsible for protecting children from abuse. The most common factors that contribute to abuse in the church as cited by Denney et al. (2018) are (a) power and access to victim(s), (b) power from not being under the surveillance of others, and (c) power over congregants by being privy to personal knowledge.

While these factors are largely structural in nature and can be mitigated with a number of preventative policies, churches are at times resistant to implement such policies, as they conflict with practiced beliefs. The beliefs that are practiced within a church, therefore, are often the determinant as to whether a church is prepared to both prevent and address child sexual abuse. For example, Anabaptist congregations often say they believe that all people are equal in the church, even though pastoral and volunteer positions give certain people more access and power. The veil of equality makes it harder to address power indifferences that contribute to abuse. In the Mennonite context, Heggen (2015) noted the following:

The strong Mennonite emphasis on “servant leadership” and “the priesthood of all believers” can make it particularly uncomfortable to talk about the power of church

leaders. Such hesitancy may make it more difficult to understand the inherent, often subtle power of the pastoral role and may make this power easier to abuse (p. 84).

Beliefs about trust, openness, vulnerability, and the inherent goodness of Christians contribute structurally to an environment that gives more opportunity for adults to sexually abuse children. In addition, other beliefs held by leaders and constituents surrounding grace, sin, forgiveness, judgment, and the role of women and children can make it difficult to respond to child sexual abuse when it occurs. Some churches are also hesitant to report abuse to the police or child protection services, which may be viewed as flawed and racist institutions.

Knowingly or not, church leaders and volunteers will often cloak their abuse under some sort of spiritual practice or shortcoming as to not draw moral outrage from others (Gardner, 2012). The most infamous occurrence of this phenomenon in the Mennonite Church USA denomination was the serial abuse of young women by internationally known scholar, theologian, and author John Howard Yoder. Yoder disguised his sexual abuse as a “grand, noble experiment” in which he claimed he was seeking to understand how to achieve deeper intimacy with others without committing sin (Martens & Cramer, 2015). Due to both Yoder’s legacy and the language in which he hid his abuses, Yoder was able to abuse dozens of women before he was eventually stripped of his ministerial credentials (Goossen, 2015).

Grace and forgiveness, which are inherent principles to most if not all Christian religions, are often the stumbling blocks for churches failing to take proper disciplinary action against sexual abusers. Because the Bible emphasizes forgiving “seventy times seven” (Matthew 18: 21–22 RSV) and “if your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone” (Matthew 18:15) rather than reporting abuse to authorities, church leaders often choose to internally discipline offenders and support victims (Koontz, 2015). The result is an

underreporting of sexual abuse, offenders who are given opportunities to reoffend, and victims who are told to forgive their abusers without receiving the professional psychological, spiritual, emotional aid they need.

The U.S. DHHS provides guidance for preventing child abuse in youth-serving organization, as shown by Saul and Audage (2007). Guidance prepared specifically for faith-based settings are also readily available (Dove's Nest, 2020b; Brotherhood Mutual, 2019; Christian Reformed Church, 2020). After providing state-specific definitions of abuse, guidelines are typically provided in these broad areas: training for staff and volunteers, screening and supervision of staff and volunteers, interactions and care for youth, facility safety, responding to suspected abuse, and implementation of policy. Increasingly, guidelines are also provided for how faith-based settings might balance safety for children with careful inclusion of individuals with an offense history into church life (e.g., not volunteering with children or youth) (Dove's Nest, 2020a). Many denominations also provide guidelines for responding when the allegations are against a church leader.

Recognizing the cross-disciplinary needs of addressing sexual abuse in church settings, Protestant denominations have begun collaborating with lawyers, social workers, and mental health professionals to create organizations to prevent abuse and support survivors. Several organizations within the Mennonite Church USA context but not sponsored by the denomination—Dove's Nest, Into Account, Our Stories Untold, and The MAP List—provide a theological and social framework for ending abuse. Dove's Nest provides resources, training, and consulting for congregations on how to prevent abuse and how to create safe sanctuary policies. Into Account and Our Stories Untold are survivor advocacy groups that publish stories of survivors, while The MAP List tracks and documents credible allegations of abuses against



pastors and church leaders. Though not specifically focused on child sexual abuse prevention and supporting survivors, the relief organization Mennonite Central Committee helps organizations around the world follow safe sanctuary practices. These organizations work with faith denominations beyond Mennonite and in other secular settings to prevent child sexual abuse and support survivors. Many other organizations with no formal connection to the Mennonite Church, such as Godly Response to Abuse in the Christian Environment (GRACE) and Survivors Network of those Abused by Priests (SNAP), work within religious settings on prevention of abuse and care for survivors.

Other faith denominations have also created policy guidelines and networks to help leaders and congregants prevent and address child sexual abuse. The Episcopal, Evangelical Lutheran, Presbyterian, Roman Catholic, Southern Baptist, and United Methodist Church have created resources to address sexual abuse within their congregations, which include reporting guidelines, guidelines for appropriate affection, screening procedures, and more.

Because church discipline is primarily handled by pastors and church leaders, however, whether these guidelines and recommendations are adopted are largely determined by local congregation leaders. Vieth (2019) notes that while all clergy are mandated reporters of child abuse, several states do not mandate reporting if the information was gained during confessional, leaving the discretion to pastors. Vieth (2019) elaborates further that there are limits to confidentiality and that one of these limits is mandated reporting laws. “However, even if a pastor is not required by law to report child abuse . . . it is ‘God and [God’s] Word that ultimately give pastors the right and responsibility to break confidence and protect the welfare of the person involved’” (p. 54).

### *The Role of Social Work*

Since individual Protestant churches typically operate with much independence and discretion from their denomination and many are nondenominational, it is important that social workers and other child advocates work to ensure there are proper policies and structures in churches to keep children safe from abuse. For pastors and other church leaders to understand the importance of prevention of child sexual abuse, they must often be presented with both theology and research as to its prevalence, mitigation, and consequences (Vieth, 2012). While social workers are not expected to operate with fluency in religious contexts, their knowledge and skills for addressing abuse is a valuable asset to churches and other religious bodies in their communities. Social workers' expertise is often the vital component that is missing in churches creating child abuse prevention policies.

Furthermore, given the prevalence of child sexual abuse within church settings, social workers must also be equipped with the cultural competency to inquire about the possibility of abuse with their clients and to understand how child sexual abuse within the church is often coupled with spiritual abuse. Social workers are not expected to understand the complexities of each individual's spiritual makeup or denomination, but they should look for spiritual abuse as a part of a bio-psycho-social-spiritual assessment and be prepared to make a referral to a faith leader, if necessary. Without an understanding of the connection between sexual abuse and spiritual abuse, social workers may be stymied in assisting clients to heal from the harm they have experienced.

## **Purpose of Study**

Other than literature based on Catholicism and Harder and Haynie (2012), the professional literature does not yet provide an evidence base for ways that Christian churches or denominations can prevent abuse.

The present study seeks to identify the ways in which Mennonite USA Church congregations are engaging in child protection in 2018, as compared to 8 years earlier, and to discover what congregations express they need to further their child protection practices. The following are the research questions used for this study:

- (1) What are the characteristics, practices, and experiences of congregations in regard to child protection, and how have they changed since 2010?
- (2) What is the relationship between types of congregations and their child protection practices?
- (3) What information and resources do congregations want to enhance their child protection practices?

## **Methods**

Dove's Nest conducted an online survey to determine the characteristics, practices, and experiences of Mennonite Church USA churches with and without written child protection policies. This 2018 survey was nearly identical to the one Dove's Nest conducted with Mennonite Church USA churches in 2010, in hopes that results could inform current practices as well as changes over time.

Mennonite Church USA is a Christian Anabaptist denomination that has a vision for healing and hope: "God calls us to be followers of Jesus Christ and, by the power of the Holy Spirit, to grow as communities of grace, joy and peace, so that God's healing and hope flow

through us to the world” (Mennonite Church USA, 2020b). Mennonite beliefs and practices vary widely but following Jesus in daily life is a central value, along with peacemaking.

In 2015, Mennonite Church USA posted *Ministerial Sexual Misconduct Policy and Procedure* resources on its website, and 3 years later, they posted further guidance, *Prevention and Response: Sexual Abuse and Non-Credentialed Individuals*. At the time of the 2010 survey, these resources were not available for congregations. The Mennonite Church USA website also includes links to organizations like Dove’s Nest and Mennonite Central Committee, to a poster for recognizing and responding to sexual misconduct, and to sermons, books, pamphlets, and articles (Mennonite Church USA, 2020a).

A nonprofit organization, Dove’s Nest has an informal relationship with Mennonite Church USA. The mission of Dove’s Nest is “to empower and equip faith communities to keep children and youth safe in their homes, churches, and communities” (Dove’s Nest, 2020a). Dove’s Nest began as a grassroots movement among Mennonites in 2009 and has grown to be a vital and respected resource for child protection training and consulting in churches, schools, and camps associated with a broad range of denominations across the United States and Canada.

### ***Sample***

During January 2018, Dove’s Nest sent two invitations through conference ministers and one by email to all congregations listed in the Mennonite Church USA online directory with email addresses. The survey tool included an informed consent language, including information on the intended purpose for the project, benefits and risks of participation, and on confidentiality for respondents. Respondents were invited but not required to provide identifying information. Responses were received from 124 out of 608 Mennonite Church USA congregations (20% response rate). Of the 124 respondents, 21 answered only the first item about whether they had a

child protection policy; analyses reported here are primarily based on the 103 valid responses (17% response rate) (sample sizes vary a lot due to missing data). In the 2010 survey, responses were received from 269 out of 855 Mennonite Church USA congregations (32% response rate). The denomination had a net decrease of 247 congregations from 2010 to 2018, due primarily to the departure of many of the more theologically conservative congregations.

### ***Instrument***

After a review of professional literature, the practices of other church denominations, and the *Safe Sanctuaries* model, and in consultation with Mennonite Church USA leadership, Dove's Nest developed a survey in 2010. The survey administered in 2018 was nearly identical, with minor changes in wording on some items and the addition of some new items to reflect maturation and changes in the field and to inform Dove's Nest on the visibility and usefulness of their services. Most questions were closed ended (dichotomous or multiple choice) and placed in a matrix with some open-ended questions. In general, the survey asked about child protection policies, personnel practices (staff and volunteers), child abuse experiences and preventive practices, and needs related to child protection and strengthening families. A more detailed description of the survey follows.

After defining a child protection policy as "a written document that outlines ways to keep children safe in your community/communities and what you will do if child abuse or neglect is suspected," opening survey questions asked if the church had such a policy. The survey then asked questions about child protection practices: What are practices used when hiring staff and accepting volunteers? How many church offices and classrooms have internal windows? How many adults and youth helpers are in the nursery, and how many adults are in each of the children's Sunday school classes?

The survey also asked churches if they had a written plan for including an individual with sex offense history into church life. Another question asked if they had a written plan for reporting suspected child abuse and if they had actually reported suspected child abuse. The next questions asked who in the church had received training on child abuse prevention and whether a child protection theme had been included in worship in the last year. Respondents were then invited to indicate the three things that would be most helpful to them in protecting children and strengthening families, followed by an open-ended comment field.

The final section of the survey invited the respondent to indicate the type of community in which the church is situated (in the country, in a small town or city, with various levels of population provided); to name the church's regional conference membership; to state the respondent's role in the church; to give the number of children, youth, and adults attending worship in a typical week; to indicate the proportion of families in the church in which English is the primary language; and to identify the race/ethnicity of people in the church.

New items in the 2018 survey asked the degree to which respondents were aware of and had used Dove's Nest resources to write or update their child protection policy, or the children's curriculum (*Circle of Grace*) provided through Dove's Nest. Respondents were also invited to express their needs for resources related to pornography, internet safety, healthy boundaries, support for victims/survivors, child-on-child abuse, and safely incorporating offenders into church life. One concluding item added in the 2018 survey invited respondents to express their interest in external accountability for their protection policies and practices.

### ***Procedure***

The four-page survey was administered online through Qualtrics; in 2010, the survey was administered online through SurveyMonkey and was piloted by four churches. Quantitative

analyses of survey results were conducted using Microsoft Excel and the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences. Qualitative analyses of open-ended item responses were conducted using Microsoft Excel by grouping responses into common categories and identifying themes.

### ***Sample Description***

The mean number of adults who attended weekly worship in respondents' churches was 77 ( $SD = 50.57$ ), with a median of 60 (range = 0–275) ( $N = 81$ ). The mean number of youth who attended weekly worship in respondents' churches was 10 ( $SD = 9.62$ ), with a median of 6 (range, 0–41), and nearly half (44%) of congregations having 5 or fewer youth. The mean number of children who attended weekly worship in respondents' churches was 18 ( $SD = 15.63$ ), with a median of 10 (range = 0–70), and 20% of congregations have fewer than 5 children. The number of adults was positively correlated with the number of youth ( $r = .633$ ) and children ( $r = .747$ ). Overall, responding congregations were smaller in 2018 than in 2010. In 2010, congregations reported a mean of 108 adults, 15 youth, and 25 children.

Based on the number of adults who were reported to attend weekly worship, responding churches were categorized into small (1–50 adults, 38% of the sample), medium (51–100 adults, 35% of the sample), and large (101–275 adults, 27% of sample) ( $N = 81$ ). English was the primary language for nearly all responding churches (95%). Only four churches reported that English was not the primary language spoken by its members.

Of responding congregations who responded to the survey item on geographic location ( $N = 85$ ), 31% reported being located in a rural area ( $n = 26$ ), 25% in a town with a population of less than 20,000 ( $n = 21$ ), 14% in a city/town with a population between 20,000 and 50,000 ( $n = 12$ ), and 29% in a city/town with a population of more than 50,000 ( $n = 25$ ). Using the geographic regions used by the U.S. Census Bureau (n.d.), Table 1 shows the geographic

representativeness of responding congregations. The proportions of responding congregations in each geographic region were similar in both surveys, with 10% fewer in the Midwest in 2010.

*[Table 1 near here]*

## **Findings**

Nearly three-fourths (74%) of congregations responding to the 2018 survey indicated they had a child protection policy compared to just over half (52%) in 2010.

### ***Characteristics, Practices, and Experiences of Congregations in Regard to Child Protection: Changes from 2010 to 2018***

More congregations in 2018 were being proactive in child protection practices than in 2010, regardless of whether they had a child protection policy (see Table 2). *[Table 2 near here]* A higher proportion of congregations were conducting background checks on staff and volunteers, and slightly more congregations were providing training and had internal windows in 2018 than in 2010. Congregations with a policy were much more likely to provide training to adults, teachers, and staff than congregations without a policy and were more likely to conduct background checks than congregations without a policy.

More specifically, responding congregations with policies in 2018 were significantly more likely to be conducting criminal background checks on staff (82%) than congregations without policies (52%) ( $\chi^2 = 8.462$ ). Similarly, responding congregations with policies in 2018 were significantly more likely to be conducting criminal background checks on volunteers (63%) than congregations without policies (40%) ( $\chi^2 = 4.131$ ).

Responding congregations with policies in 2018 were somewhat more likely to be conducting child abuse checks on staff (63%) than congregations without policies (48%) ( $\chi^2 = .178$ ). Similarly, responding congregations with policies in 2018 were somewhat more likely to



be conducting child abuse checks on volunteers (45%) than congregations without policies (28%) ( $\chi^2 = 2.234$ ).

Of the responding congregations with a policy, slightly more congregations were conducting criminal background checks on staff in 2018 than in 2010 (82% compared to 74%). Similarly, a higher proportion of congregations without a policy reported conducting criminal background checks on staff in 2018 than in 2010 (52% cp. 39%).

Of the responding congregations with a policy, a similar proportion of congregations were conducting child abuse checks on staff in 2018 as in 2010 (63% cp. 61%). In contrast, a higher proportion of congregations without a policy reported conducting child abuse checks on volunteers in 2018 than in 2010 (48% cp. 28%).

Of the responding congregations with a policy, more congregations were conducting criminal background checks on volunteers in 2018 than in 2010 (63% cp. 50%). Congregations without a policy were three times more likely to be conducting criminal background checks on volunteers in 2018 than in 2010 (40% cp. 13%).

Of the responding congregations with a policy, a similar proportion of congregations were conducting child abuse checks on volunteers in 2018 as in 2010 (45% cp. 47%). In contrast, congregations without a policy in 2018 were three times more likely to be conducting child abuse checks on volunteers than in 2010 (28% cp. 8%).

Interestingly, between 2018 and 2010, congregations with a policy reported a decrease in their practice of asking potential volunteers to complete an application (32% cp. 64%), participate in an interview (21% cp. 44%), or get references checked (32% cp. 51%), whereas congregations without a policy participated in these practices at about the same level in 2018 as 8 years earlier.

In 2018, about two-thirds of congregations with a policy were providing at least 1 hour of training to teachers (69%) and staff (63%), and less than half (41%) were providing at least 1 hour of training to parents. Also in 2018, about one-fourth of congregations with no policy were providing training to teachers (25%) and staff (26%), and an even lower proportion were providing training on child protection to adults (9%).

A slightly higher proportion of congregations with policies were providing training in 2018 than in 2010 to teachers (69% cp. 54%), staff (63% cp. 51%), and adults (41% cp. 39%). Congregations without a policy were providing more training in 2018 than in 2010, but at a lower rate than congregations with a policy, for teachers (25% cp. 11%) and staff (26% cp. 10%) and the same rate for adults (9% cp. 9%).

In 2018, most congregations with a policy had internal windows in all church offices and classrooms (86%), while only half of congregations without a policy did (50%). Slightly more congregations had internal windows in 2018 than did in 2010, regardless of whether they had a child protection policy (86% cp. 79%) or not (50% cp. 40%).

Over half of congregations with a policy in 2018 (52%) and over one-third of congregations without a policy (37%) had at least two adults in a supervised nursery during worship in 2018. Interestingly, congregations without a policy reported having at least two adults in each classroom (or one adult and a roaming adult, such as an education superintendent or usher) slightly more often (30%) than congregations with a policy (23%).

Congregations with a policy made modest improvements in having at least two adults in the nursery (52% cp. 40%) and decreased in their likelihood of having two adults in classrooms (23% cp. 37%) from 2018 to 2010. Congregations without a policy increased from 2018 to 2010 in having two adults in the nursery (37% cp. 21%) and in classrooms (30% cp. 14%). Since most

responding congregations in 2018 were very small (median of 60 adults during a typical worship service), many congregations reported having one adult in a classroom and another roving adult. A number of congregations also reported not having a staffed nursery in 2018.

Most but not all congregations with a child protection policy (84%) in 2018 reported having a written plan for reporting suspected child abuse or neglect. Two-thirds of responding congregations with a child protection policy (66%) had a written plan for integrating an individual with a history of sexual offense. Almost no congregations without a child protection policy had written plans for reporting abuse or neglect (8%) or integrating an individual with a history of sexual offense (4%).

About the same proportion of congregations with a policy had a written plan for reporting suspected child abuse or neglect in 2018 as in 2010 (84% compared to 77%), with similar findings for if congregations without a policy had such a plan (8% compared to 6%). A much higher proportion of congregations with a policy had a written plan for integrating an individual with a history of sexual offense in 2018 than in 2010 (66% compared to 39%), while nearly all congregations without a policy did not have such a plan (4% in 2018 and 2010).

Just under one-fifth of congregations with and without a policy in 2018 had suspected child abuse or neglect with a child connected to their congregation (16% and 17%, respectively). This is only slightly more in 2018 than in 2010.

Less than half of congregations with and without a policy in 2018 had incorporated a child protection theme into worship in the past 12 months (49% and 38%, respectively), which is very slightly more in 2018 than in 2010.

### ***Relationship between Congregation Types and Child Protection Practices***

Congregations of all sizes and community and geographic contexts increased the likelihood they had a child protection policy between 2010 and 2018, with the exception of congregations in the west, which stayed steady at 50%. The largest increases were found in small- and medium-sized congregations and congregations in rural areas and in the Midwest (see Table 3). *[Table 3 near here]*

Nearly all congregations of over 50 adults in 2018 had a child protection policy (89% of 51–100 adults, and 91% of 101–800 adults) compared to congregations with fewer than 50 adults (58%) ( $\chi^2 = 11.310$ ). While congregations of all sizes were more likely to have a policy in 2018 than in 2010, congregations with 100 or fewer adults showed higher increases than did the larger congregations (32% and 30% increase for congregations of 50 or fewer adults and 51–100 adults cp. 19% for congregations with more than 100 adults).

In 2018, half of congregations with five or fewer children (50%,  $n = 12$ ) had a policy compared to most congregations with more than five children (82%,  $n = 68$ ).

Congregations in geographic contexts of fewer than 50,000 population were more likely to have a policy than were congregations in cities with a population of 50,000 people or higher (81%/81%/75% cp. 69%), although the difference was not statistically significant. Congregations in rural contexts showed the highest increase in adopting a child protection policy between 2018 and 2010 (37% increase).

In 2018, over three-fourths (76%) of congregations with more than 50 adults were situated in a rural context compared to congregations in larger contexts (57% of congregations with more than 50 adults were in towns of less than 20,000; 50% in cities with a population of 20,000 to 50,000; and 56% in cities with a population of over 50,000) ( $\chi^2 = 4.179$ ).

Congregations in the Midwest and northeast in 2018 were much more likely to have a policy (89% and 85%) than were congregations in the south or west (57% and 50%) ( $\chi^2 = 7.786$ ). Congregations in the Midwest increased the most in their likelihood of having a policy between 2010 and 2018, moving from 55% to 89%.

Significant changes were made to Pennsylvania's Child Protective Services Law in 2013 and 2014 which required screenings and trainings. Of the six congregations in PA, five had child protection policies. The one that did not was a large church and reported they did conduct criminal and child abuse background checks on staff and volunteers but did not offer any training to staff and volunteers. In 2010, a higher proportion of congregations in PA had a child protection policy than did congregations in other states. While the proportion was nearly equal in 2018 for congregations in PA compared to those not in PA, the number of responding churches in PA was much lower.

### ***Information Wanted by Congregations to Enhance Their Child Protection Practices***

On average, respondents in the 2018 survey wanted more information on healthy boundaries (especially for youth) and internet safety. The least requested information was on pornography (see Table 4). *[Table 4 near here]*

Respondents were asked the degree to which they would be interested in Dove's Nest providing external accountability for their child and youth protection policies and practices. On a scale of 1 to 7, with 7 indicating "very interested," the mean rating was 3.79 ( $SD$  1.98), with 27 out of 61 respondents indicating a 5, 6, or 7.

## **Discussion**

### ***Characteristics, Practices, and Experiences of Congregations in Regards to Child Protection: Changes from 2010 to 2018***

Overall, congregations in 2018 reported being more proactive in child protection practices than in 2010, regardless of whether they had a child protection policy. While the reason for this change in proactivity was not assessed in this study, it is likely due to multiple factors, including presence of child abuse and child abuse prevention information in the media and increased expectations from insurance providers for liability purposes.

Congregations with a child protection policy responding to the 2018 survey were more likely to be proactive in child protection practices than congregations without a policy, especially in regard to conducting criminal background checks on staff; providing child abuse training to staff, volunteers, and parents; having internal windows; and having written plans for responding to possible abuse and to offenders. Nevertheless, congregations without policies responding to the 2018 survey were participating in some child protection practices, especially conducting criminal background checks and child abuse checks on staff and incorporating a child abuse theme into worship.

When hiring new staff, about three-fourths of congregations with a policy responding in 2018 conducted criminal background checks and about two-thirds conducted some form of child abuse checks. About half of congregations without a policy participated in the same child protection practice. About 20% fewer of congregations with and without a policy conducted the same criminal background and child abuse checks on volunteers. Background checks are conducted routinely in schools, childcare, and other human service settings. Similarly, they are conducted quite routinely in most large churches and in Catholic churches. Although not known empirically, some small- to medium-size churches are reluctant to adopt the practice of conducting background checks, citing cost, invasion of privacy, or administrative burden as reasons. Many of these smaller churches may also perceive that abuse is not possible or prevalent

in their community or that they could detect an abuser without the use of a background check and so are not motivated to conduct background checks.

Congregations with policies did not change much in their child protection practices from 2010 to 2018, whereas congregations without policies improved significantly in their child protection practices in that same time period, especially in regard to conducting background checks. For example, congregations without a policy in 2018 were three times more likely to be conducting criminal background and child abuse checks on volunteers than congregations without a policy in 2010. It may be that while congregations are policy averse, they still recognize the need for child protection practices.

About two-thirds of congregations with a policy in 2018 were providing at least 1 hour of training to teachers and staff, and less than half were doing so for adults in the congregation. Even fewer congregations without a policy were providing training in 2018, but there was a substantial increase for these congregations since 2010. The role of education is critical in raising the awareness of abuse, in recognizing the signs of possible abuse, and in reporting the suspicion of abuse to authorities.

Most congregations with a policy (86%) reported they had internal windows in all church offices and classrooms while only half of congregations without a policy (50%) reported the same. Congregations did not change much in this basic child protection practice from 2010 to 2018.

While small improvements were made in congregations following the two-adult rule in nurseries and classrooms, the percentage of churches respecting this important child protection practice is still quite small. This finding may be related to the median size of responding churches having fewer than 100 adults, 12 youth, and 6 children. Smaller churches are typically

more trusting of one another and refer to their community as “family,” and have fewer adult personnel available to staff a nursery or teach a children’s class. The practice of leaving doors cracked open and having a roving superintendent or other volunteer or moving Sunday school classes to a public part of the church campus may play a role in improving child safety in these smaller settings.

Most congregations with a child protection policy (59 of 62) had a written plan for reporting suspected child abuse and neglect. It is disappointing that 3 did not have such a plan. Congregations with a policy increased significantly in having a written plan for integrating an individual with a history of sexual offense between 2010 and 2018; this has been an area of emphasis for Dove’s Nest’s provision of training and resources. As one would expect, nearly all congregations without a child protection policy also did not have written plans for reporting suspected child abuse or integrating an individual with a history of sexual offense.

A small number of congregations with and without a policy in 2018 had suspected child abuse and neglect with a child connected to their congregation, which is about the same number as 8 years earlier. For a variety of reasons, many congregations are unlikely to report abuse, leaving victims and potential victims vulnerable to abuse. It may be that a congregation does not recognize the behavior as abusive or that the congregation thinks they can handle it without bringing in authorities, perhaps to protect their reputation in the larger community or perhaps to preserve relationship with the individual doing the harm or their family.

Less than half of congregations had incorporated a child protection theme into worship in the past year, which is about the same proportion as reported 8 years earlier. Speaking about child abuse from the pulpit raises awareness of the issue, increases the likelihood of reporting,



increases the practice of consent and healthy boundaries, and, if done appropriately, can help to ease the pain of survivors.

### ***Relationship between Congregation Types and Child Protection Practices***

Larger congregations with more children were much more likely to have child protection policies than smaller congregations with fewer children. In this sample, larger congregations were more likely situated in rural communities than in urban communities; a higher proportion of these larger congregations in rural context reported having adopted child protection policies in 2018 than in 2010.

The churches responding to the survey were similar in size to other churches in Mennonite Church USA. In 2018, as evidenced by a denominational leader, Mennonite Church USA had about 608 congregations with about 70,061 members, which calculates to an average of 115 members per church (N. Kauffman, personal communication, May 28, 2020).

Congregations in the Midwest and northeast were more likely to have policies than in other parts of the United States; these are also regions where Dove's Nest, the sponsor of this survey, has held more trainings.

As expected with increased enforcement of child protection practices in Pennsylvania beginning in 2013 (Pennsylvania Department of Human Services, 2020), congregations in this state were very likely to have policies and to be following child protection practices. In 2018, 85 of the 608 (14%) Mennonite Church USA congregations were located in Pennsylvania. These congregations were significantly impacted by the state's new policies, especially in regard to reporting. At the same time, many of the congregations located in Pennsylvania were also seriously considering leaving the denomination due to theological differences in 2018, which likely influenced the low response rate from Pennsylvania churches in 2018 ( $n = 6$ ).

## ***Information and Resources Wanted by Congregations to Enhance Their Child Protection***

### ***Practices***

Respondents in the 2018 survey wanted more information on healthy boundaries (especially for youth) and internet safety. Some were interested in Dove's Nest providing external accountability for their child and youth protection policies and practices.

### ***Implications for Practice and Research***

This study opens a new area of study for child abuse prevention in church settings. Other than the study upon which this one builds and studies on Catholic settings, no other empirical study yet exists in the child welfare literature on the development, adoption, and implementation of child protection policies in Christian denominations or churches. Also, no other empirical study is yet published on the practices of a Christian denomination or church in preventing child abuse, other than those in Catholic settings. This study is also groundbreaking in that it shows the change over time of one small Christian denomination in moving toward improved policies and practices with child protection. While significant work remains in ensuring the safety of children in this and likely other Christian church settings, it is encouraging to see progress in the right direction.

Ensuring that children are safe from abuse while in church settings is imperative. All types of abuse—whether it be sexual abuse, spiritual abuse, or other types of abuse—are real dangers, especially for children and other vulnerable individuals. The church setting presents unique vulnerabilities in terms of structure and theology, and it is incumbent on church leaders and members in all types of denominations and settings to take necessary steps to ensure the safety of children.

Whether they are cognizant of it or not, denominations and churches and their leaders have significant power over their members in numerous ways. This power must be turned toward the positive by creating, adopting, and implementing child protection policies and practices.

Social workers should consider engaging denominations and churches through both theological and structural avenues. The theological avenue provides the purpose and context for the work of child protection. It needs to address core beliefs and values such as power, grace, and forgiveness. If this work is outside the ability or familiarity of the social worker, it's important to bring in others who can help. Social workers can be especially helpful in addressing structural needs of church settings, including the provision of trainings on recognizing the signs of abuse and reporting suspicions of abuse; the detection and addressing of points of vulnerability in the church's physical structure, schedule, or other practices; and the provision of information on personnel practices and supervision of children.

### **Limitations**

The limitations to this study are many and must be noted when considering the findings. The Mennonite Church USA denomination is small, and findings may not be generalizable to Protestant or nondenominational congregations. The proportion of responding congregations was also small, likely impacted by the denomination going through a tumultuous time in 2018, with quite a number of congregations and conferences discussing whether to leave the denomination over theological differences not directly related to child abuse. As evidenced by a denominational leader, 19 congregations left the denomination in 2018, and another 12 left in 2019 (N. Kauffmann, personal communication, May 28, 2020). Consequently, congregations reconsidering their relationship to the denomination may have been less likely to give attention to a survey they perceived as coming from the denomination. (While Mennonite Church USA

promotes the use of Dove's Nest's resources and trainings, Dove's Nest is not officially affiliated or supported by Mennonite Church USA.) It's also important to realize that congregations who responded to the 2010 survey were not necessarily the same as those responding in 2018.

It is quite likely that response bias favored congregations that were being more proactive in child protection practices. Therefore, it can be assumed that overall, a lower proportion of congregations have child protection policies than is shown here. Also, the survey was completed by one individual in the congregation, usually a church leader, and may not represent others in the church. Researchers did not request copies of congregation's policies so were unable to confirm survey responses. While researchers inquired about congregation's offering training to adults, they did not ask the content of this training. With any survey, responses may indicate knowledge and behavioral intent but may not translate to actual behaviors.

Nearly all responses to both the 2010 and 2018 surveys were from English-speaking congregations. (In 2010, one survey was received from a non-English-speaking congregation, while in 2018, four surveys were received from non-English-speaking congregations.) The experiences and perspectives of non-English-speaking congregations is not yet known.

### **Future Research**

Implications for further research are many. The prevalence of child abuse among Christian churchgoers is not yet fully known. Similarly, the number of children who have been abused in Christian churches, who have been abused in another setting while also attending a Christian church, or who have been abused in the past and now attend a Christian church are also not yet fully known. These prevalence numbers or their approximations are critical for identifying and describing the needs and finding resources and solutions for meeting the needs. Follow-up research could invite more specificity including audits of protection policies and training

curricula. Additional research could also be conducted to explore congregations' reticence to screening volunteers and implementing background checks. Also, since both the 2010 and 2018 surveys obtained few responses from non-English-speaking congregations, other methods need to be employed to assess the knowledge, policies, and practices of these congregations.

### **Conclusion**

Churches are present in every city and town in the United States as well as in most rural settings. These churches open their doors, physically or virtually, to members and visitors many times a week and for many different reasons. Even while they follow their spiritual mandate to be open and welcoming, they must be aware of the risks involved in ministry and be prepared to protect from and respond to harms. Regardless of whether the abuse was perpetrated by a church leader or member or by a member of an outside organization using the church's facilities, the church must rise up, recognize the harm, report it to appropriate authorities, and provide support to the child and protective family members in many healthy ways. The church must commit to not compounding the harm by denying the existence of abuse or by turning a blind eye to it.

### **Acknowledgments**

The authors acknowledge the significant contributions to this project of Dove's Nest and of Mennonite Church USA leadership and congregations.

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Table 1. Geographic Regions of Responding  
Congregations

<b>Geographic Region</b>	<b>2010</b>		<b>2018</b>	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Midwest	72	48%	36	58%
Northeast	39	26%	13	21%
South	21	14%	7	11%
West	18	12%	6	10%
<i>N</i>	150	100%	62	100%

Table 2. Child Protection Practices of Churches With and Without Child Protection Policies

	2010 (N = 269)			2018 (N = 103)		
	$\chi^2$	Had a policy	Did not have a policy	$\chi^2$	Had a policy	Did not have a policy
<b>When hiring staff, do you:</b>						
Ask them to complete an application?	9.079 $p = .003$	111 (93%)	82 (80%)	0.011 $p = .917$	59 (83%)	21 (84%)
Conduct an interview?	0.021 $p = .884$	111 (96%)	101 (95%)	.796 $p = .372$	62 (87%)	20 (80%)
Check references?	1.244 $p = .265$	112 (96%)	94 (92%)	2.457 $p = .117$	61 (86%)	18 (72%)
Conduct a criminal background check?	25.658 $p \leq .000$	79 (74%)	38 (39%)	8.462 $p = .004$	58 (82%)	13 (52%)
Conduct a child abuse check?	22.365 $p \leq .000$	62 (61%)	26 (28%)	1.813 $p = .178$	45 (63%)	12 (48%)
<b>When accepting volunteers, do you:</b>						
Ask them to complete an application?	64.468 $p \leq .000$	68 (64%)	9 (9%)	3.894 $p = .048$	23 (32%)	3 (12%)
Conduct an interview?	2.728 $p = .099$	44 (44%)	33 (33%)	1.200 $p = .273$	15 (21%)	8 (32%)
Check references?	16.935 $p \leq .000$	52 (51%)	23 (23%)	.618 $p = .432$	23 (32%)	6 (24%)
Conduct a criminal background check?	32.653 $p \leq .000$	55 (50%)	13 (13%)	4.131 $p = .042$	45 (63%)	10 (40%)
Conduct a child abuse check?	36.618 $p \leq .000$	47 (47%)	8 (8%)	2.234 $p = .135$	32 (45%)	7 (28%)
<b>Provided at least 1 hour of training on child abuse/protection to:</b>						
Adults	27.937 $p \leq .000$	42 (39%)	9 (9%)	7.983 $p = .005$	25 (41%)	2 (9%)
Teachers	44.597 $p \leq .000$	61 (54%)	11 (11%)	13.880 $p \leq .000$	48 (69%)	6 (25%)

Staff	42.360 $p \leq .000$	58 (51%)	10 (10%)	9.215 $p = .002$	42 (63%)	6 (26%)
<b>Other child protection practices:</b>						
Have internal windows in all church offices and classrooms	44.261 $p \leq .000$	99 (79%)	41 (40%)	13.002 $p \leq .000$	61 (86%)	12 (50%)
Have at least two adults in nursery during worship	10.636 $p = .014$	47 (40%)	17 (21%)	1.272 $p = .259$	33 (52%)	7 (37%)
Have at least two adults in each classroom (or one adult and a roaming adult)	19.173 $p = .001$	46 (37%)	15 (14%)	.587 $p = .444$	16 (23%)	7 (30%)
Have a written plan for integrating an individual with a history of sexual offense	37.906 $p \leq .000$	44 (39%)	4 (4%)	28.067 $p \leq .000$	46 (66%)	1 (4%)
Have a written plan for reporting suspected child abuse or neglect	112.304 $p \leq .000$	89 (77%)	6 (6%)	45.256 $p \leq .000$	59 (84%)	2 (8%)
Have you suspected child abuse or neglect with a child connected to your church?	1.934 $p = .164$	13 (11%)	6 (6%)	.012 $p = .912$	11 (16%)	4 (17%)
Incorporated child protection theme into worship in past 12 months	2.075 $p = .557$	46 (41%)	33 (32%)	1.004 $p = .316$	35 (49%)	9 (38%)

Table 3. Church Size and Context, and Child Protection Policies

	2010			2018			Difference
	<i>n</i>	$\chi^2$	Had a policy	<i>n</i>	$\chi^2$	Had a policy	
<b>Church Size</b>	<i>N</i> = 180			<i>N</i> = 81			
Small (1–50 adults)	55	26.850	14 (26%)	31	11.310	18 (58%)	+32%
Medium (51–100 adults)	58	$p \leq .003$	34 (59%)	28	$p \leq .003$	25 (89%)	+30%
Large (101–800 adults)	67		48 (72%)	22		20 (91%)	+19%
5 or fewer children and 5 or fewer youth	20	5.337	6 (30%)	12	6.123	6 (50%)	+20%
More than 5 children and 5 youth	157	$p \leq .021$	90 (57%)	68	$p \leq .013$	56 (82%)	+25%
<b>Church's Community Context</b>				85			
rural area/country	55	4.262	24 (44%)	26	1.273	21 (81%)	+37%
town with a population of less than 20,000	52	$p = .235$	33 (64%)	21	$p = .735$	17 (81%)	+17%
city/town with a population between 20,000 and 50,000	24		13 (54%)	12		9 (75%)	+21%
city/town with a population of more than 50,000	54		28 (52%)	26		18 (69%)	+17%
<b>Church's Geographic Context</b>	147			62			
Midwest	75	3.762	41 (55%)	36	7.786	32 (89%)	+34%
Northeast	40	$p = .288$	26 (65%)	13	$p = .051$	11 (85%)	+20%
South	16		6 (38%)	7		4 (57%)	+19%
West	16		8 (50%)	6		3 (50%)	+0%

In PA	37	3.282	25 (68%)	6	.031	5 (83%)	+15%
Not in PA	111	$p = .070$	56 (51%)	56	$p = .861$	45 (80%)	+29%

Table 4. Information Wanted by Congregations

(*N* = 68)

(0 = information not wanted to 10 = yes, information wanted)

	<b>average</b>	<b>0-4</b>	<b>5-7</b>	<b>8-10</b>
Pornography	5.4	20	30	13
Internet safety	7.1	8	26	34
Healthy boundaries for...				
children	6.6	12	26	30
youth	7.2	6	26	34
adults	6.8	8	27	28
Giving support and voice to adult				
victims/survivors	6.6	10	29	25
Child-on-child abuse	6.2	18	20	24
Appropriate touch	6.3	14	25	20
Safely incorporating offenders into				
church life	6.4	13	25	26