

ICF Utrecht, a safe church!

Policy on preventing and dealing with sexual abuse

I. Introduction

The church should be a safe place. A refuge that offers love, safety and security for everyone, both young and old. However, this protection safety is not always guaranteed. Sexual abuse occurs within church relationships; sometimes it is obvious, sometimes much more subtle.

In sexual abuse, power and trust are misused to satisfy one's own needs, usually under the pressure of confidentiality. Sexual abuse is a difficult subject. Yet within ICF Utrecht we want to open this subject for discussion. Therefore, we have chosen to draw up a policy on how to be a safe church and to express ourselves clearly: in the Christ's congregation there is no place for abuse in any form whatsoever.

We do this together with the advisors of the hotline Abuse in Church Relationships (www.meldpuntmisbruik.nl).¹ To ensure a safe church together!

The church council is responsible for safety in the congregation. It is responsible for the appointment of committed staff and volunteers, including their methods/ways of working. However, we cannot say that only the church council is responsible for safety in the church. In fact, safety is everyone's responsibility. That is why we want to pay attention to this subject in the following ways.

II. Raising awareness

Raising awareness within the congregation forms the basis for this policy. Awareness of inequalities in power or authority amongst church members, and the effects of it. power inequality among church members and its effects. Differences in power between the people in authority and members of the congregation, such as supervisors and participants of the children's and youth ministry, elders and members who need pastoral care. The effect may be that someone in a position of power displays inappropriate behavior towards someone with less authority, thereby jeopardizing the safe and secure environment. Consequently, as ICF Utrecht we:

- Recognize that this type of inappropriate behavior can also occur in our own congregation.
- Are aware that every member of the congregation has a right to safety church.
- Maintain attention for the subject: regularly putting 'safe children's and youth ministry' and 'safe church' on the agenda at policy level; what are we doing, is it going well and what can improve?
- Must ensure that through various activities, awareness of the safety of members is raised, during meetings (Bible study groups, children's and youth ministry, celebrations).

Regular communication with all those involved, such as the church council, church officials (both staff and volunteers) and the whole congregation, is of crucial importance.

¹ The hotline Sexual Abuse in Church Relationships (Seksueel Misbruik in Kerkelijke Relaties) is an initiative of the Christian Reformed Churches (CGK), the Netherlands Reformed Churches (NGK), the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands (Liberated; GKV) and the Restored Reformed Church (HHK).

People in positions of power in the church are responsible for maintaining pure relationships with the members of the congregation with whom they deal. They should be aware of that. We therefore want to put the subject of safety in church annually on the agenda, at least with the church council and the supervisors of the youth and children's ministry. Various working methods such as case studies will be used for this.

III. Prevention

The church should be a safe place. In fact, if one should feel safe anywhere, then it is in the church, amongst your own congregation. Prevention of sexual abuse is therefore our highest commitment. Prevention serves the church and thus the Lord of the church.

Safety in the church is created by interacting safely and openly. ICF Utrecht wants to be such a safe church, and to commit itself to corresponding measures. The main prevention measures in the ICF are:

- Appointment of safeguarding advisors identifiable to church members, who are easily approachable and functioning as an 'ambassador' for a safe church and safe youth work
- Drawing up a code of conduct for children's work and pastoral visits.
- Careful selection of volunteers, especially children's and youth workers, people for the prayer team, translators and people making pastoral visits. This means specifically:
 - Names of identified volunteers are presented to the church council and these volunteers are officially appointed by the church council.
 - Committing to and discussing relevant codes of conduct
 - Application for Certificate of Good Conduct (VOG) by volunteers and professionals who work with minors and people in a vulnerable position

NB. For pastors there is a Code of Conduct established by the Synod for ministers which already applies to them. This can be found at <https://cgk.nl/project/klachten/>

IV. Intervention

For the ICF Utrecht, it is important that if something goes wrong or seems to go wrong between supervisors and young people or between people with official positions in church (e.g. members of the church council) and church members, it is reported. A complicated situation can arise in which all kinds of interests and loyalties can get mixed up. It is precisely then that it is important to make good choices, in which justice is done, as much as possible, to all parties involved and care is taken to ensure that no further damage is caused. Within the Christian Reformed Churches to which ICF Utrecht belongs, agreements have been made with regard to safety in the church, prevention and the adequate handling of complaints. Various documents have been prepared for this, including:

1. The [protocol](#) for congregations confronted with abuse in church relationships
2. The [Complaints Procedure](#) of the GKv, CGK, NGK and vGKNK

See also: <https://cgk.nl/project/klachten/>

V. (After)care

When an incident occurs and goes to arbitration after decision by the complaints committee is made, it is important to take into account the consequences for the victim, the perpetrator, and the church, in order to ensure proper (after) care. The [Guide for Church Councils](#) with appendices, drawn up by the CGK, GKV and NGK, calls on the church to:

- Consider that victims of abuse do not suffer further damage in the church service (choice of words in prayers, choice of songs).
- Provide aftercare and pastoral care to victims of inappropriate behavior in the church.
- Provide aftercare and pastoral care to perpetrators of inappropriate behavior in the church. He/she must not be the same person assigned to the victim.

Some members of the church are victims or perpetrators of incest, domestic violence, abuse of power and threatening situations at work (ambulance personnel, military personnel, police, workers in health care, social and welfare services) or elsewhere. We want them to feel safe too in the congregation. These people also need to be heard, seen and recognized.

VI. Communication

The contents of this policy should normally be communicated during the Sunday services, during church meetings / language group meetings, during the meetings of the supervisors of the children's and youth ministry and during the church's meetings with the various coordinators. The flyer "The Church, a safe place!" Has been published and distributed for this purpose in Dutch, English and Farsi. The Arabic version is still in progress.

Information about the role of the safeguarding advisor will be included in the members' guide of the church. The information on the website (see: <https://www.icf-utrecht.nl/over-ons/>) will be kept up to date. This concerns, for example, the name and contact details of the safeguarding advisor. In addition, the present policy document will be available on the website.

VII. Policy retention

It is very important to keep to the policy, which we do through the above mentioned activities. The policy would be evaluated and adjusted where necessary, during the annual meetings with the church council. During these meetings the proposed annual plan for the coming year will also be adopted.

The Hotline for Abuse informs safeguarding advisors and offers regular training. This helps to keep the policy on the agenda and reinforce it.

Anyone with a complaint or signs of inappropriate behavior or sexual abuse by an church official can also contact this hotline (if necessary anonymously) for advice and guidance in any further steps.

Website: www.meldpuntmisbruik.nl

Utrecht, February 2020

Annex 1 Definitions

Definition Sexual abuse

The Hotline for Abuse defines abuse as any expression of verbal, non-verbal or physical behavior, whether intentional or unintentional, desirable or undesirable, in the form of sexual acts and/or sexually orientated allusions by a church official.

Definition Church official

A church official is a man or woman who, in accordance with their position in the church, or on the basis of an appointment by a church assembly in a non-official function in the church, or on the basis of an appointment in a special position for groups of church members, holds a position of trust and responsibility within a church, and as such can establish and maintain relationships with church members and others.