

CLASSIS NIAGARA SAFE CHURCH POLICY

1. Introduction

Classis Niagara, as one part of the Christian Reformed Church in North America and God's broader church family, strives to act in accordance with the central belief that every person is created in the image of God, and therefore should be treated with respect, dignity, and love, regardless of age, race, gender, or socio-economic status.



At the same time, we confess that the sin of abuse still occurs and needs focused attention. We recognize that the spiritual root of all forms of abuse is the irresponsible use of power and the betrayal of trust within the body of Christ. We give thanks that Christ died to set us free from the bondage of sin and that the Holy Spirit continues to work within the body of Christ to restore broken relationships. In gratitude we will do our part by taking intentional measures to guard against and prevent the sin of abuse in all activities that fall under the jurisdiction of Classis Niagara.

II. Guiding Principles

1. All people, as image bearers of God, are worthy of respect, and will be treated in a manner that upholds their dignity and does not demean them in their own eyes or in the eyes of others. Human sexuality is also a gift of God to be respected, valued and celebrated.
2. Abuse of any person is not acceptable and will not be tolerated. We will strive to foster the development of healthy relationships and prevent abuse in our ministries. To the best of our ability, we will avoid situations that may give rise to abuse, unfounded allegations of abuse, or the appearance of impropriety.
3. All participants in activities under the jurisdiction of Classis Niagara are urged to be vigilant against abuse and will be held accountable for their words and actions. Those who violate the standards of conduct expected of them will be subject to disciplinary measures.
4. By the grace of God, healing is possible for victims of abuse. Healing is assisted through the ministries of churches in Classis Niagara and wise counselling, which should be offered as early as possible. Forgiveness and restoration of relationships broken by incidents of abuse of power may be possible, but cannot be forced. They can be assisted by provision of support for those affected by abuse and wise counselling. In some cases, however, full restoration of relationships may not be appropriate and restrictions may be necessary.
5. Leaders of Classis Niagara activities are expected to exercise their duties with the highest ethical standards, recognizing that leaders have a special responsibility to take preventive and corrective measures. When disclosure of suspected abuse occurs, appropriate investigative and corrective actions will begin without delay. All actions will support healing, repentance, and restoration of the abused, the abuser, and other broken relationships. For abusers, these actions may include disciplinary measures, up to and including denial of volunteer or paid positions and other privileges of participation in activities under the jurisdiction of Classis Niagara. After satisfactory resolution, suitability for return to a volunteer or paid position will be reviewed.

6. Abuse is also a crime punishable under federal and provincial laws in Canada. The Bible teaches respect for the mandate of civil authorities to maintain justice; we pledge to cooperate with them in the implementation of laws prohibiting abuse. We will not, however, leave the matter of abuse and its impacts to the law courts and social services alone, because abuse and healing also have a spiritual dimension. The church has its own calling, as Christ's ambassadors, to prevent abuse, warn against the abuse of authority, and provide a healing ministry for those whose lives have been affected by the sin of abuse.
7. All participants in Classis Niagara activities will practice confidentiality. Any information received and any record maintained regarding allegations of misconduct or abuse will be kept confidential. Only those who need to know will have access to such information and only to the records for a specific case in question, as specified in the protocol for reporting and response.

III. Definitions of Abuse

Classis Niagara activities will be guided by the following definitions of abuse:

- **Physical Abuse:** any non-accidental act that violates the dignity of the image of God in another person, inflicting dehumanizing pain or injury. Physically abusive behaviour also includes physical neglect, which means not doing what one is supposed to be doing to meet the physical needs of someone in his or her care.
- **Emotional Abuse:** any attempt to control another person's life through words, threats, fears, and/or deprivation in such a way that it impairs a person's God-given sense of self-worth.
- **Sexual Abuse:** any sexual experience forced on one person by another, which may or may not involve physical contact. Sexual abuse also includes any form of sexual misconduct by a leader in a position of spiritual authority or counselling capacity, even if there was consent at the time.
- **Harassment:** engaging in a course of vexatious comment or conduct against another person that is known or ought reasonably to be known to be unwelcome.
- **Sexual Harassment:** engaging in a course of vexatious comment or conduct against another person because of sex, sexual orientation, gender identity or gender expression, where the course of comment or conduct is known or ought reasonably to be known to be unwelcome. It also includes any form of sexual solicitation or advance where the person making the solicitation or advance is in a position to confer, grant or deny a benefit or advancement to the other party and the person knows or ought reasonably to know that the solicitation or advance is unwelcome.
- **Child Neglect:** failure to provide for a child's basic physical, emotional, or educational needs or to protect a child from harm or potential harm.

IV. Intentional Measures to Prevent Abuse

Classis Niagara will strive to create a safe environment for all participants in all activities under its jurisdiction through general measures that foster respectful relationships. This includes on-going

implementation of the following suite of specific abuse prevention measures. The details for each component are listed below.

- **Mandatory screening:** All employees, contract personnel, and volunteers will be screened, as part of the hiring process, including police checks for any full-time or contract personnel who will regularly engage in ministries involving young people or vulnerable groups.
- **Code of Conduct:** All employees, contract personnel, and members of the Classis Ministry Council will be asked to sign the CRCNA Code of Conduct (in formation.) It includes obligations with regard to confidentiality, speech, bullying, etc.
- **Training:** All employees, contract personnel and members of the Classis Ministry Council will participate in appropriate training on abuse prevention for their roles within Classis Niagara, and will be encouraged to take additional or refresher courses. Records of training will be kept by the Classis Niagara Safe Church Team Coordinator.
- **Safe premises:** Locations where meetings are held will have windows, open doors, adequate lighting, and adequate washrooms. Any one-on-one meetings of classis employees, contract employees or volunteers on classis business, such as meetings will take place in public spaces or where they are clearly visible by others.
- **Transportation:** Trips from home to regularly scheduled meetings will be considered private arrangements, outside the jurisdiction of Classis Niagara. When travelling long-distance or overnight on Classis Niagara business, arrangements will be made to use public transportation or, if travelling as a group, include more than two persons in a private vehicle.
- **Reporting and Response to Allegations:** A written protocol for reporting suspected abuse and responding to allegations of abuse will be followed for any incidents relating to activities under the jurisdiction of Classis.

IV. A. Additional Details on Specific Measures

Screening:

For all employed positions, screening will include:

1. Written applications, kept on file by the Classis Stated Clerk.
2. Reference checks, noted on file by the Classis Stated Clerk.

For employed or contract personnel or volunteer leaders who will have substantive contact with young people under the age of 18 and vulnerable adults, screening will also include:

3. Submission of police check completed within the last two years.

Code of Conduct: Classis Niagara will use the code of conduct approved by Synod 2021 for use by all CRCNA affiliated bodies. Records of signatures will be kept on file with the Stated Clerk for 50 years.

Training: The Classis Ministry Council will ensure that:

1. The mandatory training in abuse of power for all new pastoral staff, is completed, in accordance with decisions made by Synod in 2019.

2. A plan for on-going safe church training within Classis Niagara is developed and implemented in conjunction with the denominational Safe Church Ministry.
3. All employees, contract personnel and members of the Classis Ministry Council have basic training that includes how to respond to allegations of abusive behaviours of various types.
4. Focused training for persons hired to lead ministries with youth or vulnerable groups. This training is to be carried out in conjunction with the denominational Safe Church Ministry and/or Dove's Nest Ministries.

Safe Church Policy and Training by Classis Niagara members: The Classis Niagara Safe Church Team (CNSCT) will facilitate as needed and regularly track safe church training practices for abuse awareness and prevention/response with respect of Safe Church Ministry for the churches of Classis. The CNSCT will help share and connect churches and persons to resources, set up/identify training events and connect churches to them. CNSCT, on behalf of Classis, will monitor progress in the areas of education and training. CNSCT will submit regular updates to Classis as a way of mutual accountability between congregations of Classis in their Safe Church work. The denominational Safe Church Ministry, along with Dove's Nest, should be the primary resources to provide training.

CRCNA Safe Church and Dove's Nest resources can be accessed at
[Safe Church Ministry | Christian Reformed Church \(crcna.org\)](#)
[Resources | Dove's Nest](#)

or in person through the CRCNA Safe Church Communications officer serving Canadian classes - info@crcna.org or 1-800-730-3490

Safe Premises: Windows in meeting rooms will not be covered or obstructed during meetings, except as necessary for video or other online presentations, in which case there will always be a minimum of 5 persons in attendance.

IV. B. Youth Activities

The following policies will apply to any youth activities held under the jurisdiction of Classis Niagara or involving Classis Niagara staff, contract personnel or volunteers.

1. Supervision: At least two unrelated adults, who have been screened and trained, must be present at any Classis Niagara sponsored function. In general, Classis Niagara follows the two adult rule: one adult should never be alone with one youth in non-public spaces during Classis Niagara activities.
 - a. Youth under age 18 must have written permission from parents or guardians to participate in youth group activities. Rare exceptions may be made for youth living without parents, such as street youth, when obtaining permission would prohibit attendance in activities that are in the best interests of the young person.
 - b. Displays of affection between a youth leader and a youth participant in a Classis Niagara-sponsored activity will be limited to such actions as a brief hug, an arm around the shoulder, an open-hand pat on the back, a handclasp or handshake, or a light touch to the forearm, to avoid misunderstanding the intent of the leader. A youth participant's right to refuse such displays of affection will be respected.
 - c. Youth leaders of Classis Niagara sponsored activities will not engage in repeated gift giving, phone calls, or communications of a personal nature with any youth participant.

2. Discipline policy: All discipline in Classis Niagara sponsored youth events is to be carried out in love, not anger. All leaders will read and follow the following guidelines.
 - a. If a youth participant misbehaves, supervisors will use redirection and/or verbal means to guide a youth's behaviour. If that does not work, the youth will be removed from the activities to minimize disruption and taken to a parent. If a parent is not immediately available, the safety of the young person will be ensured until return to participation or parents.
 - b. Corporal punishment is not permitted. Corporal punishment includes, but is not limited to, slapping, hitting, pushing and touching in an aggressive manner.
 - c. Abusive verbal discipline is not permitted. Abusive verbal discipline includes, but is not limited to, yelling, insults, bullying, verbally embarrassing or threatening a young person expressly or by implication.
 - d. Concerns about a youth's behaviour should be reported to the supervisor of the program or event.
 - e. Parent(s) are to be informed and involved whenever a child/youth misbehaves beyond minor correction or if a pattern of misbehaviour increases.
 - f. Expectations of behaviour must reflect the age and level of comprehension of the participants. Similarly, discipline must reflect their age and level of comprehension.
 - g. Young persons are to be reminded of the kind of behaviour that is acceptable for the setting in a positive and constructive way.
 - h. As much as possible restorative practices such as circle sharing or talking through an incident or behavioural issue should be used to restore relationships between youth and/or leaders.
3. Transportation
 - a. Any arrangements to transport minors between home and sponsored activities by someone other than the parent or guardian are considered private arrangements, not under the jurisdiction of Classis Niagara sponsored leaders.
 - b. Transportation of youth that is part of a Classis Niagara sponsored event, e.g. off-site retreat, will be arranged in advance, with written permission forms signed by a parent, and will avoid one adult transporting one youth in a private vehicle.
 - c. A leader may deny someone permission to serve as a chauffeur for others during activities that are under the jurisdiction of classis and the leader's decision will be final.
4. Communication and social media: All communications between adult leaders and youth participants of Classis Niagara sponsored events must be traceable.
 - a. Communication between youth leaders and youth participants at Classis Niagara sponsored events will usually be in group formats. Youth leaders will limit one-to-one electronic communications with a young person under the age of 18.
 - b. Photos of youth participants will only be shared in any form with explicit permission by the young person, and, in the case of young people under 18, with the permission of a parent or guardian.
 - c. Young persons under 18 will not be referenced by name and/or other identifying information on social media or websites without explicit permission of the youth participant and a parent.

- d. Any requests by young persons or parents with regard to electronic communications and use of photos will be respected.

V. Reporting and response to allegations of abuse

A. General Policies

1. Evidence or suspicion of abuse by anyone in a leadership position or of a minor will be reported to the Chair of the Classis Niagara Safe Church Team and handled with care. The purpose of reporting is to stop the abuse, to provide assistance for the victim, to hold the perpetrator accountable and to begin the process of correction and redemption.
2. Confidentiality will be respected. The name of a victim will not be made public without her or his consent. An alleged abuser will be assumed to be innocent until a conviction is registered or an admission is recorded and his or her confidentiality will be ensured during the investigation.
3. Evidence or disclosure of abuse of a person who is a minor will be reported to civil authorities, in keeping with the provisions of provincial law. Abuse of a person who is not/no longer a minor will be reported to outside authorities only with the consent of the victim, even if the abuse occurred while the person was a minor. In situations where the victim is a vulnerable person, it may be necessary to notify civil authorities.
4. Classis has instructed each congregation to include in their Safe Church Policy, a confidential reporting step which stipulates that when an abuse issue is brought to the attention of a Council, that the Chair of the Classis Niagara Safe Church Team (or the Team as a whole), be informed that Council is dealing with a situation. The level of detail of the disclosure would go on a case by case basis as needed.
5. Classis Niagara recognizes and respects the right of a victim to pursue legal remedies through civil courts, independent of any action taken within the processes established by the CRC. Spiritual support, pastoral help, and other forms of appropriate engagement by the church will be provided, whether or not legal action is taken in a particular case.
6. The CRCNA Safe Church Ministry Advisory Panel process may be an appropriate step in reporting and dealing with situations of abuse. The guidelines are spelled out in the Classis Niagara Safe Church Team mandate and policy available at [Classis Niagara Safe Church Team](#) and will be carried out as stipulated.

B. Protocol for Reporting Abuse

1. Anyone who has evidence or disclosure of abuse that occurs within the ministry or involving an employee, contract personnel or volunteer of Classis Niagara should inform the chair of the Classis Niagara Safe Church Committee.
2. If there is an instance of suspected abuse occurring within one of the churches, the reporting of responding to that abuse situation is and remains the primary responsibility of the individual church. The CNSCT is no way replaces that work. Any advice given by the CNSCT or its members remains confidential and is given as advice only.

3. For the purposes of accuracy, the person reporting the abuse is asked to submit the allegation in writing as soon as possible, including what was experienced, observed or heard and submit it to the Chair of the Classis Niagara Safe Church Committee in confidence. If the person reporting the abuse requires a support person to help with this process, this can be arranged through the Chair of the Classis Niagara Safe Church Committee.
4. The Classis Niagara Safe Church Committee will, in consultation with the victim, as appropriate, determine what course of action will be taken, including:
 - Referral to the appropriate pastoral team member as a matter requiring pastoral counselling, and/or assistance through the Safe Church Counselling Fund if needed.
 - Recommendation that an advisory panel be established to engage in fact-finding and provide advice to the Executive of Classis Ministry Council.
 - Notification to civil authorities, when required under the provisions of provincial law.
5. The Classis Safe Church Committee operates in an advisory capacity to the designated authorities in the church. Any pastoral and/or disciplinary action will be taken by the designated authorities, operating under the established rules of order of the CRC.
6. If the situation involves a minor, the incident will be reported to the appropriate civil authorities, under the provision of provincial law. If there is a question about the need to report, advice can be obtained by calling the Family and Children's Services Niagara (Children's Aid Society) - info@facsniaagara.on.ca or 1-888-937-7731.
7. If the situation involves a vulnerable adult who may be subject to provincial trusteeship, the Classis Niagara Safe Church Committee will determine the need to notify civil authorities.
8. If the situation involves a church leader, matters such as notification, temporary suspension from office, and disciplinary measures will be handled in accordance with the process adopted by the Synod of the CRC in conjunction with advice from the CRCNA Safe Church Ministry - [Safe Church Ministry | Christian Reformed Church \(crcna.org\)](http://SafeChurchMinistry|ChristianReformedChurch.org) Depending on the circumstances and severity of the incident, suspension from a position, with pay for paid staff, may be temporary to allow time for further investigation, and will be done without prejudice as to the final determination. Suspension may include limitations or conditions on contact with youth under the age of 18 or other church members, pending the conclusion of a more formal hearing process. Disciplinary measures will be in accordance with the established policies of the Synod of the CRC, including, when appropriate, a permanent ban on holding pastoral office in the CRC.