

# Safe Sanctuaries

September 24

# 2009

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In all of our ministries with children, youth, and adults, we are committed to demonstrating the love of Jesus Christ so that each person will be "...surrounded by steadfast love, ...established in the faith, and confirmed and strengthened in the way that leads to life eternal" ("Baptismal Covenant II," United Methodist Hymnal, p. 44).

Christ United  
Methodist Church  
Mobile, AL

Christ United Methodist Church  
**SAFE SANCTUARIES POLICY**  
Updated September 2009

**OUR MANDATE**

**Introduction:** The General Conference of The United Methodist Church, beginning in April 1996, adopted a resolution aimed at reducing the risk of child sexual abuse in the church. The adopted resolution includes the following statement:

- Jesus said, “Whoever welcomes (a) child...welcomes me.” (Matthew 18:5). Children are our present and our future, our hope, our teachers, our inspiration. They are full participants in the life of the church and in the realm of God.
- Jesus also said, “If any of you put a stumbling block before one of these little ones..., it would be better for you if a great millstone were fastened around your neck and you were drowned in the depth of the sea.” (Matthew 18:6) Our Christian faith calls us to offer both hospitality and protection to the little ones, the children. The Social Principles of The United Methodist Church state that “...children must be protected from economic, physical and sexual exploitation, and abuse.” (Paragraph 162C)
- Tragically, churches have not always been safe places for children. Child sexual abuse, exploitation and ritual abuse occur in churches, large and small, urban and rural. The problem cuts across all economic, cultural and racial lines. It is real, and it appears to be increasing. Most annual conferences can cite specific incidents of child sexual abuse and exploitation within churches. Virtually every congregation has among its members adult survivors of early sexual trauma.
- Such incidents are devastating to all who are involved: the child, the family, the local church and its leaders. Increasingly, churches are torn apart by the legal, emotional, and monetary consequences of litigation following allegations of abuse.
- God calls us to make our churches safe places, protecting children and other vulnerable persons from sexual and ritual abuse. God calls us to create communities of faith where children and adults grow safe and strong.

(From The Book of Resolutions of The United Methodist Church – 2004: copyright 2004 by The United Methodist Publishing House, pp. 201–202)

Therefore, in covenant with all United Methodist congregations, the Alabama–West Florida Annual Conference adopts this policy and its accompanying procedures to demonstrate our absolute and unwavering commitment to the physical safety and spiritual growth of all our children, youth, senior citizens, and at-risk adults.

**Statement of Covenant:** In all of our ministries with children, youth, and adults, we are committed to demonstrating the love of Jesus Christ so that each person will be “...surrounded by steadfast love, ...established in the faith, and confirmed and strengthened in the way that leads to life eternal” (“Baptismal Covenant II,” United Methodist Hymnal, p. 44).

**Definitions of Abuse:**

- Physical abuse – abuse in which a person deliberately and intentionally causes bodily harm to a child.
- Emotional abuse – abuse in which a person exposes a child to spoken and/or unspoken violence or emotional cruelty.
- Neglect – abuse in which a person endangers a child’s health, safety, or welfare through negligence.
- Sexual abuse – abuse in which sexual contact between a child and an adult (or another older and more powerful youth) occurs.
- Ritual abuse – abuse in which physical, sexual, or psychological violations of a child are inflicted regularly, intentionally, and in a stylized way by a person or persons responsible for the child’s welfare.
- Abuse of vulnerable adults – ritual, emotional, or sexual abuse of any person over 19 years of age with physical, mental and/or developmental disabilities.

### **The church at risk:**

Any organization involved with young people is a place where abuse could occur. Several factors make local congregations, districts, and annual conferences more susceptible to risk:

- Churches behave as relatively trusting organizations, relying upon their members and their leaders to conduct themselves appropriately. Sometimes this trusting attitude persists even in the face of questions or reports of misconduct.
- Churches are notoriously inactive when it comes to screening its volunteers and/or employees who work with children and youth. Often, no investigation is done at all before total strangers are welcomed aboard.
- Churches routinely provide opportunities for close contact and for close personal relationships with children. Indeed, these are nurtured and encouraged as we try to live out the gospel message.

### **Consequences of abuse:**

- When one child is abused within a church or Christian program, many victims are created, including the child, the congregation, the child's family, and often the family of the abuser.
- The congregation becomes a victim after abuse is revealed and relationships are fractured. It may also suffer for a long time when civil or criminal litigation ensues as a result of the abuse.
- Of foremost importance is the child who has been harmed and for whom care must be provided.
- In addition, paragraph 2702 of the 2004 Book of Discipline names child abuse, sexual abuse, sexual misconduct, and sexual harassment as chargeable offenses for clergy and lay members.

No congregation or annual conference can afford, either financially, ethically, or morally to fail to implement strategies for the reduction and prevention of any and every kind of abuse. Therefore, it shall be the policy and covenant of the Alabama–West Florida Annual Conference of the United Methodist Church to do everything in our power to prevent physical, emotional or sexual abuse against children, youth, and adults with developmental disabilities involved in any ministry sponsored by the Annual Conference or in any of our local congregations.

Further, we are called to minister to those persons who are experiencing abuse and to those who have been victims of abuse in the past. To that end we covenant to be aware of our legal responsibilities and to comply with those responsibilities and go beyond those responsibilities when necessary to act justly in the best interest of those who have been abused or those who are most vulnerable to abuse.

Careful screening is the best way to reduce the risk of abuse of children, youth and vulnerable adults. It can be time consuming and expensive, but well worth the effort and peace of mind that comes with having the most reliable, committed and experienced staff and volunteer in place for every program that involves children, youth and vulnerable adults.

Although it is our fervent hope and prayer that child sexual abuse does not occur in our programs, we must put into place sufficient mechanisms to reduce the risk of abuse of children, youth, and those who work with them. For that purpose, our ministries shall implement the following procedures in congregation, district, and conference ministry programs and events. Local congregations may adopt their own policy provided the policies and procedures meet these minimum standards. Local congregations not adopting a policy shall be governed by this policy.

## **STANDARDS, CRITERIA, and RESPONSIBILITIES**

### **Minimum age**

The following standards for authority figures (whether volunteers or staff) are designed to separate authority figures from the group they are serving by age or enough years to reinforce recognition of the authority figure's role.

1. Authority figures – defined as the primary leaders of youth and children's activities
  - a. To work with youth (grades six and above) the authority figure must be a minimum of age 18 and it is recommended they are at least four years older than the youth involved.
  - b. To work with children (infants–fifth grade) the authority figure must be a minimum of age 18.
2. Assistants – defined as persons who lend aid to the authority figure and act at the direction of the authority figure, including volunteers, interns, and camp counselors. Whether working with youth or children, assistants must be:
  - a. A minimum of 12 years of age and four years older than the participants, and
  - b. In the judgment of a staff member, competent to assist in the activity.
  - c. An assistant less than 18 years of age may not be counted as an adult in the child/adult ratios.
  - d. An assistant must lend aid with at least two authority figures present.

### **Two adult rule**

A minimum of two non-related adults are to be utilized in all programming with children, youth, and at-risk adults. When it is impossible to staff with two non-related adults, there must be an additional adult serving as a floater with visual and physical access to all areas.

### **Open-door policy**

Classrooms or child care rooms should be open to visitation at any time without prior notice by staff, parents, or other volunteers.

### **Sign-in and Sign-out Procedures**

Sign-in and sign-out procedures should be in place for all ministries for and with children in the local church when parents are not expected to be present.

### **Six month rule**

It is highly recommended that a six-month rule be established in the selection of volunteers wishing to give service in the areas of children and youth ministry for non-outreach activities. This means that all volunteers demonstrate an active relationship in good standing in a local congregation or campus religious organization for a minimum of six months. Persons not meeting this minimum requirement may serve only in an assistant capacity with two other non-related adults.

### **Adult/Child ratios**

All ratios must be understood in light of first having two adults present at all times. Adults and authority figures should never be alone with a child or youth. This can include, but is not limited to an automobile while taking a young person home, a classroom with windowless or locked doors, or a cabin at camp.

State codes are required for day care centers and school-based programs and are a strong standard for all programs to follow. This includes Sunday school, mid-week, and summer programs.

### **Alabama State Codes for child care ratios:**

- Birth to 18 months – 1 Adult to 5 Children
- 18 months to 2 ½ years of age – 1 Adult to 7 Children
- 24 months to 36 months of age – 1 Adult to 8 Children
- 2 ½ year to 4 years of age – 1 Adult to 11 Children
- 4 years of age to school age – 1 Adult to 18 Children
- School age to 8 years of age – 1 Adult to 21 Children

- 8 years of age and older – 1 Adult to 28 Children

Note: For more information contact the Alabama Department of Human Recourses

**Participants who are physically or mentally impaired:**

- Those needing constant and individual assistance or supervision – 1 leader to 1 participant
- Those needing close, but not constant, assistance or supervision – 1 leader to 2 participants
- Those needing occasional assistance – 1 leader to 4 participants
- Those needing minimal assistance – 1 leader to 5 participants

**Overnight programs:**

Overnight events include summer camps, retreats, mission trips, lock-ins, or any event that extends through the evening. The adults staying with the young people must always be the same gender as the young people. The adults must never share a bed with a young person and should not be alone in the room with a young person at any time.

- Grades 1–3 – 1 adult to 8 young people
- Grades 4–8 – 1 adult to 10 young people
- Grades 9–12 – 1adult to 12 young people

**Motel/hotel settings**

- Students must be placed in single–gender rooms. If rooms adjoin, both rooms should be the same gender.
- Adults of the same gender should be assigned to each room of students, and where available placed in adjoining rooms with the adjoining doors propped open at all times.
- In the event that adjoining rooms are unavailable, multiple adults of the same gender will receive the keys to the non–adjoining rooms with instructions to make sure to stop by unannounced to those non–adjoining rooms.
- Adults are never to share a bed with a child of whom they are not the parent.

**Transportation**

- All drivers should be screened in the same manner as other leadership for an event including a review of their motor vehicle record.
- When private vehicles are used to transport young people for programmed church–related events, leaders should ensure that appropriate insurance is being maintained by both the church and the private driver.
- All drivers must be 21 years of age or older.
- Where possible, it is recommended that two adults be placed in each vehicle or the vehicles teamed in minimum groups of two that stay together at all times.
- The safety policies and guidelines for the operation of church–owned vehicles should be strictly followed at all times.
- On all planned trips, a signed, permission slip with medical authorization should be on file. In the absence of such a form, the adult should call a parent or relative to pick up the child.

**Mentoring**

Mentoring programs or other efforts to pair young people with caring adults are often credited with being the key to a young person’s success in life. Therefore, mentoring programs should follow these guidelines:

- Provide basic screening and background checks for all adults who will be working with children and youth.
- Establish clear written guidelines for settings, boundaries, and the environment where the mentoring will occur.

- Providing training for all adults (or youth, if they will be working with children) who are interested in being mentors.
- Make it clear that all persons are expected to follow congregation and conference guidelines for reducing the risk of abuse.
- Outings should be in public places with routes and time frames agreed upon in advance, and know to all. Outings with several mentors and young people are preferred.
- One-to-one mentoring or tutoring should take place in a group setting, such as one large room rather than individual rooms spread throughout the church building.

## **Counseling**

At any non-licensed counseling session with children, youth, or adults of the opposite gender, any non-windowed door of the room used should remain open for the entire session. Ideally, the session will be conducted at a time when others are nearby, even if they are not within listening distance. A counseling session should never be held in secret, even if the person being counseled makes that request.

Whenever someone seeks counseling, it is important to determine in the initial meeting if the counselor is actually qualified to address the needs effectively. If not, the person should be referred to another counselor.

Licensed counseling will be pursuant to the conduct expected by the approved licensing body.

## **Interpersonal boundaries**

Adult workers with youth and children must be attentive to:

- Appropriate dress codes
- Appropriate use of language
- Appropriate demonstrations of affection and encouragement.

## **Home visitation**

When visiting a young person in their home as part of a program related activity, the two non-related adult rule still applies. Educating young people of these requirements before they visit is most beneficial.

# **RECRUITING, SCREENING, AND TRAINING**

## **Recruiting and screening volunteer and paid staff**

1. All persons employed or volunteering as an authority figure for children/youth shall:
  - a. Complete Application/Commitment Form. (form at end of this policy)
  - b. Provide three character references. References may be contacted on all applicants having access to children, youth and vulnerable adults.
  - c. Be interviewed by the director of the ministry or designated ministry staff.
  - d. Consent to the following background checks:
    - i. Multi-state criminal and sexual offender check based on social security number
    - ii. Motor vehicle records (for those who will be transporting children, youth, or at-risk adults)
    - iii. A background check is valid for two years.
  - e. Have the experience and qualifications for the position.
  - f. Be trained by the church in maintaining the Safe sanctuaries policies.
2. All persons employed or volunteering as an assistant for children/youth shall:
  - a. Complete an Application/Commitment Form.
  - b. Be interviewed by the director of the ministry or program.
  - c. Provide three character references.
  - d. Consent to the following background checks: (if applicable)

- i. Multi-state criminal and sexual offender check based on social security number
    - ii. Motor vehicle records (for those who will be transporting children, youth or at-risk adults)
  - e. Be trained by the church in maintaining the Safe sanctuaries policies.
3. In the event a substitute worker needs to be brought in under last minute circumstances, that person must:
  - a. Complete an Application/Commitment form.
  - b. Provide a character reference who can be contacted immediately by the director.
  - c. Complete a basic orientation/training provided by the director or other supervisor before working.
  - d. Consent to the following background check:
    - i. Multi-state criminal and sexual offender check based on social security number.
4. A Temporary/Single Event volunteer may be enlisted at the discretion of the responsible Ministry Leader.

## **REPORTING ABUSE**

### **Reporting abuse or alleged abuse in Alabama:**

Alabama's mandatory child abuse and neglect reporting law states that all school teachers and officials, social workers, day care workers or employees, mental health professionals, members of the clergy as defined in Rule 505 of the Alabama Rules of Evidence, or any other person called upon to render aid or medical assistance to any child, when the child is known or suspected to be a victim of child abuse or neglect, shall be required to report, or cause a report to be made of the same, orally, either by telephone or direct communication immediately, followed by a written report, to a duly constituted authority. When an initial report is made to a law enforcement official, the official subsequently shall inform the Department of Human Resources of the report so that the department can carry out its responsibility to provide protective services when deemed appropriate to the respective child or children.